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CHRISTIO-CONJURE IN *VOODOO DREAMS*, *BABY OF THE FAMILY*, *THE SALT EATERS*, *SASSAFRASS*, *CYPRESS & INDIGO*, AND *MAMA DAY*

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 CHRISTIO-CONJURE AS HISTORICAL FICTION	32
3 CHRISTIO-CONJURE AND THE GHOST STORY	55
4 REVOLUTIONARY CHRISTIO-CONJURE	80
5 CHRISTIO-CONJURE ACTIVISM	102
6 CHRISTIO-CONJURE ROMANCE AND MAGIC	123
7 CONCLUSION	147
NOTES	160
WORKS CONSULTED	183
VITA	195

ABSTRACT

This project examines contemporary African American women's literature and the legacy established by literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston. The discussion is positioned at the cross-section of three on-going conversations: 1) current discourses on Conjure in African American women's literature, 2) analyses of Africanisms in black culture, and 3) previous scholarship on recurring topics in African American women's writing. Here these frames are unified under one thematic: Christio-Conjure—a rubric borne of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that designates the fusing of Christian and West African religious tradition in African American culture. Thus, this project establishes a new literary matrix for analyzing twentieth-century black women's writing.

Each chapter features a novel viewed through the critical lens of Christio-Conjure. Zora Neale Hurston's and Luisah Teish's research offers a framework for the elements of Christio-Conjure integrated throughout the novels. Chapter two, "Christio-Conjure as Historical Fiction," analyzes Jewel Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau* (1993), a work that provides a compelling image of the black woman as a Christio-Conjure priestess. Chapter three, "Christio-Conjure and the Ghost Story," examines how Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby of the Family* (1988) incorporates the Christio-Conjure tenet of matrilineage with the cultural transmission of *mother wit* as African American folk wisdom. Chapter four, "Revolutionary Christio-Conjure," addresses the revolutionary aspects of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), highlighting African American communal transformation and afrofemcentric female bonding. Chapter five, "Christio-Conjure Activism," examines Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) with the title characters as proverbial *soul sistahs* who employ

Christio-Conjure in self-actualization and communal healing. Chapter six, “Christio-Conjure Romance and Magic,” discusses the love story of Cocoa and George against the backdrop of Gloria Naylor’s revision of the holy trinity in *Mama Day* (1989). As liberation tales, these novels depict characters that appropriate Christio-Conjure as a source of empowerment. In addition, the authors themselves employ Christio-Conjure in their writing as a reaffirmation of their cultural and literary heritage. As a focal point, then, Christio-Conjure functions as a centering mechanism in contemporary twentieth-century black women’s writing, a body of literature historically marginalized.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Design and Scope

This project focuses on select twentieth-century African American women's literature in relation to the legacy of writing established by early twentieth-century literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston. To this end, the discussion is positioned at the cross-section of three on-going conversations. First, I situate my project within current discourses on Conjure in African American women's literature. In addition, I incorporate analyses of Africanisms in black American culture. Also, to a lesser, yet still significant degree, I integrate previous scholarship on recurring topics in African American women's writing such as the quest for identity motif and the theme of communal bonding. Previously, the academic discourse generated by these foci existed, by and large, as separate and distinct areas of study. Here, these frames are unified under one thematic: Christio-Conjure—a rubric borne of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that designates the fusing of Christian and West African religious tradition¹ in African American culture. Thus, I establish a new literary matrix for analyzing twentieth-century black women's writing. In this discussion, I approach the subject of Christio-Conjure from two distinct perspectives: 1) as an ideological belief system that explains black women's experiences in life and in literature and 2) as a ritualistic practice that fosters black women's spiritual development in real life and in fiction. Applying Christio-Conjure as a critical theory, I examine its ideology and practice in five contemporary novels: Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* (1993), an historical fiction; Ansa's *Baby of the Family* (1988), a coming of age novel; Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), a novel about social revolution and unification; Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), a novel of social activism; and Naylor's

Mama Day (1989), a romantic novel. The selection includes both celebrated and obscure authors and is a survey of contemporary literature featuring Christio-Conjure. As a dual agent of spiritual liberation and social empowerment, in black women's writing Christio-Conjure narratives facilitate the symbolic re-centering of the historically de-centered African American female identity. As such, the Christio-Conjure literary movement represents an afrofemcentric—i.e., black, woman-centered—revision of American history.

Defining Literary & Cultural Christio-Conjure: Chesnutt, Hurston, & Teish

Christio-Conjure as a literary model represents a matriarchal network designed to extol the black woman—continental and diasporic—as the life-force and mother of humanity. A corpus of African American women writers has demonstrated a critical interest in Christio-Conjure not only because of its cultural link with the past, but also because it elevates the image of the black woman. Beginning with one-act plays written by women during the Harlem Renaissance (e.g., May Miller, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston) and including a host of contemporary writers (viz. Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Tina McElroy Ansa, and Jewell Parker Rhodes), black women writers function metaphorically as literary Christio-Conjure women.

Although this form of writing typically exists under the dominion of black women writers, in some instances, Christio-Conjure characters and/or tales appear in male-produced texts.² However, male and female writers appropriate the theme quite differently. Male novelists, such as Charles Chesnutt, Ishmael Reed (in *Flight to Canada*, 1989), and literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., primarily focus on trickster

figures—generally, but not exclusively, self-centered and self-interested—who vie for personal advancement (economic or otherwise). Conversely, women writers such as Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Tina McElroy Ansa, Gloria Naylor, and Jewell Parker Rhodes feature family and community-oriented figures who promote psychological survival and spiritual salvation for themselves and others. This literary chasm is predicated on historically gendered spheres, e.g., the economic (male sphere) versus the emotional/spiritual (female sphere), as well as the individual (male sphere) versus the familial/communal (female sphere). There are, however, exceptions to this rule; Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and playwright August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (1990) contribute to the literary cultivation of Christio-Conjure in ways I designate as female.³

Granting these rare literary exceptions, there is a conspicuous gendered split in the treatment of Christio-Conjure in black literature. This split is particularly apparent in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899 added emphasis). Chesnutt’s collection of short stories, despite its illusory title, is a decidedly male-centered text. While the tales feature Conjure women, namely Aun’ Peggy and Tenie, these women remain marginalized as their stories are appropriated first by John, the white narrator, and then again by Uncle Julius, the black storyteller and “old trickster” himself (Ferguson 40). Throughout the tales, Julius negotiates the economy of the post-emancipation plantation, symbolized by his interaction with his white employers, John and Annie. In the “Conjurer’s Revenge,” for example, Julius manipulates John by employing a language that “plays to the perceptual biases of the white world that John and Annie symbolize” (Ferguson 41). Their world, as described by Robert Bone, is “a

world of economics [. . .] and a dogged skepticism of anything that smacks of magic or conjuration. It is the world [. . .] of capitalist enterprise as it invades the Reconstruction South” (41). As trickster, Julius manipulates the Conjure tradition within the context of his storytelling as a commodity, which yields profit for himself, e.g., grapes and honey, and sometimes profit for others, e.g., a group meeting hall.

Similar to Julius who casts spells upon John and Annie with his oral tales, Chesnutt conducted some spell-casting of his own. At the dawn of the twentieth century the white demand for African American folklore was great. Like his white characters John and Annie, Chesnutt’s white audience—if sales are any indication—was also charmed by his folktales featuring Uncle Julius. There are compelling theories concerning how Chesnutt may have charmed his readership. Richard Brodhead contends that “the persuasion of [Julius’] telling relocates his hearers’ imaginations with this mind-mangled world, where he can subject them to the counterforce of his different understanding” (10). While Julius, as trickster, may have successfully subjected his hearers “to the counterforce of his different understanding,” Chesnutt’s sway over his readers, like his position on the subject of Conjure, itself, is dubious.

Chesnutt’s treatment of Conjure renders him a black literary enigma of sorts, an ambiguous figure at best. His Conjure women are prone to excessive error with hexes that either go awry or utterly fail; consequently, their craft cannot be analyzed with any degree of seriousness. Addressing the issue of Conjure in an essay published in 1901, Chesnutt asserted that “relics of ancestral barbarism are found among all peoples, but advanced civilization has at least shaken off the more obvious absurdities of superstition” (qtd. in Sollors 119). His position here is clearly aligned with John rather than Julius, and

in a sense, his statement makes a mockery of Julius's conjuring tales in the same way Julius's tales mock Aun' Peggy and Tenie's conjuring capabilities. Additionally, for Chesnutt's *Conjurers* there is dissonance between declaring themselves Christian and practicing Conjure. Addressing the gendered rift in black literature, Houston A. Baker maintains that Chesnutt's Conjure women demonstrate "a specifically male appropriation of the conjure woman's work" for "clearly male material benefits" (79). In his theoretical analysis of Conjure in African American literature, Baker joins the camp of Ishmael Reed, August Wilson, and a number of black women writers who work in the idiom of Christio-Conjure. These writers employ Christio-Conjure as a vehicle for interpreting and articulating black women's cultural experiences.

Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, literary foremother⁴ Zora Neale Hurston laid the foundation for the fictional treatment of Christio-Conjure with her non-fictional,⁵ anthropological publications *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). These texts delineate Christio-Conjure as it existed in New Orleans, Jamaica, and Haiti in the early twentieth century. They serve as guidebooks for the fecund body of contemporary black women's Christio-Conjure writing, with Hurston as a looming, impressive figure at the forefront of the literary movement. I propose that *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* function as "mother-texts" for Christio-Conjure novels published throughout the twentieth century, especially those in the later half.

Using Hurston's work as a backdrop, I define five contemporary novels as Christio-Conjure texts: Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams*, Ansa's *Baby of the Family*, Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, and Naylor's *Mama Day*. Each novel features at least one archetypal Christio-Conjure character: a matriarchal figure

who offers physical and spiritual healing in the black community, often in her role as a midwife. These characters, figuratively and literally, preserve and perpetuate various forms of life in their communities. Highly esteemed for their knowledge and wisdom, they are well versed in the blended tenets of the spiritual paradigm and serve as mentors for emerging Christio-Conjure characters. Within this socio-literary framework, the five novels I discuss possess a unique intertextuality and function as “speakerly texts” (*Signifying*, Gates xxv). That is, they engage in a textual dialogue, responding thematically not only to one another but also to Hurston’s earlier works. Rhodes, Ansa, Bambara, Shange, and Naylor represent a continuum of fiction writers who maintain a literary lineage, drawing upon the cultural lessons of the past while advocating the future mental, physical, and spiritual empowerment of African diasporic women.

In 1935, the same year she published *Mules and Men*, Hurston also published an article based on her New Orleans anthropological research entitled “Hoodoo⁶ in America.” Both the article and *Mules and Men* document her experiences in New Orleans as a Voodoo practitioner. Hurston, it seems, was fascinated by the “Neo-African religion” (Reed xi). In *Mules and Men*, she researches Marie Laveau, the legendary Voodoo priestess of New Orleans. Luke Turner, claiming to be Laveau’s nephew, explained to Hurston that “[t]ime went around pointing out what God had already made. Moses had seen the burning bush. Solomon by magic knowed all wisdom. And Marie Laveau was a woman in New Orleans” (201). Here, Turner lucidly characterizes Laveau as a biblical prophet. In the following excerpt, he describes one of the annual rituals over which Laveau presided and underscores the syncretism of Laveau’s religious practices:

Out on Lake Ponchatrain [. . .] she hold a great feast every year on the Eve of St. John’s⁷ partly because she is a

Catholic and partly because of hoodoo. [. . .] Nobody see Marie Laveau for nine days before the feast. But when the great crowd of people at the feast call upon her, she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked on the waters of the shore. As a little boy I saw her myself. When the feast was over, she went back into the lake, and nobody saw her for nine days again. (89)

Turner suggests Laveau is invested with Christ-like powers, possessing the ability to walk on water. This deification of Laveau coincides with the fact that “[blacks] and women notably predominated in the leadership of [Voodoo]. This set it off from manifestations of black Christianity that swept through the South” (Genovese 220). Hurston, having grown up a preacher’s daughter in the South, saw the elevated status of women in Voodoo as antithetical to women’s inferior status in the Christian church. Through her research she learned that women in Voodoo were revered, and she became a Voodoo priestess⁸ in New Orleans under Turner’s tutelage.

In addition to her work in New Orleans, Hurston’s fascination with the feminine allure of Voodoo is reflected in her anthropological research in the Caribbean. Although she highlights the inferior social position of masses of women in the Caribbean, she also discusses Caribbean women who attain powerful positions⁹ in the community as priestesses. Hurston documents Jamaican burial rituals characterized by a “strong flavor of matriarchal rule” (41). In *Tell My Horse* she describes a dance ritual: “a woman breaks through the dancers with a leap like a lioness emerging from cover. Just like that. She sings with gestures as she challenges the drummers, a lioness defying the tribesmen” (53). In this ritual, the stereotypical male attributes of strength and power are ascribed to the female dancer. A symbolic queen without a king, she commands reverence from the

tribesmen. Further, Hurston examines the “Nanas” as local priestesses. Through the lioness dancer and the Nanas, she presents two afrofemcentric prototypes: the defiant woman who challenges the male power structure and the revered matriarch esteemed throughout the community. Images of these women reoccur in Christio-Conjure texts, underscoring the genre’s debt to Zora Neale Hurston.

In Haiti, as in Jamaica, Hurston focuses on the role of women and describes Haiti as “the black daughter of France” (93). In Haiti, Erzulie Freida,¹⁰ the goddess of love, possesses even higher cultural status than the lioness dancer and Nanas in Jamaica. Like the historical figure Marie Laveau who would rather “dance and make love” (*Mules*, Hurston 201), Erzulie is sexually charged and unfettered. Hurston explains that unlike her Greek and Roman counterparts, Erzulie “has no children and her husband is all the men of Haiti. That is, anyone of them that she chooses for herself [. . .]. As the perfect woman she must be loved and obeyed” (*Tell* 121). Hurston establishes a dichotomy between European and African goddesses, casting the former in a restricted role, confined to traditional European realms of womanhood. While the European goddess is bound to serve others as mother and wife, in contrast, the African goddess is unbound, liberated, and autonomous. In the fictional narratives discussed in this project, the Christio-Conjure women characters struggle to achieve the autonomy exhibited by Erzulie.

The deification of the goddess¹¹ figure as well as the prominent role of the priestess in West African religion help shape the afrofemcentric dimensions of Christio-Conjure. Vodun¹² rituals, for example, feature “the priestess as the central figure—the person who is the oracle to the spirit of Vodun” (Baker 80). The strikingly womanist¹³ power of this African practice is captured in the opening anecdote of the Voodoo section

of *Tell My Horse*. Hurston reports:

“What is truth?” Dr. Holly asked me, and knowing that I could not answer him he answered himself through a voodoo ceremony in which the Mambo, that is the priestess, richly dressed, is asked this question ritualistically. She replies by throwing back her veil and revealing her sex organs. The ceremony means that this is the infinite, the ultimate truth. There is no mystery beyond the mysterious sources of life. (113)

This sacred ceremony not only personifies ultimate truth as feminine, but it also highlights feminine deification intrinsic to West African culture.

The Conjure tradition in Haiti has received considerable critical treatment among contemporary scholars—e.g., *Voodoo Heritage* (1980) by Michael Laguerre, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988) by Wade Davis, *The Voudou Quantum Leap: Alternate Realities, Power and Mysticism* (2000) by Reginald Crosley, et al. However, earlier in the century, Hurston divided her research by examining Conjure culture in both Haiti and Jamaica. In the first section of *Tell My Horse*, she explicates the duality of religious practice in Jamaica. She says the “tables” emphasize a ritual that “boils down to a mixture of African obeah and Christianity enlivened by very beautiful singing” (4). Hurston outlines various features of the Jamaican spiritual belief system, including the use of candles to attract spirits and the belief that ancestral spirits dwell in glass bottles kept by living family members. These Conjure references resurface throughout the novels I later discuss as well as in Julie Dash’s film script, *Daughters of the Dust*¹⁴ (1994).

Specifically in Hurston’s discussion of the “Balm Yard,” she exposes the fusing of Christian and West African religious tradition within Jamaican culture:

[a] “Balm Yard” is a place where they give baths, and the

people who operate these yards are to their followers both doctor and priest. Sometimes he or she diagnoses a case of natural ailment, and a bath or a series of baths in infusions of secret plants is prescribed. More often the diagnosis is that the patient has been “hurt” by a duppy, and a bath is given to drive the spirit off. The balm yard with a reputation is never lacking for business. These anonymous rulers of the common people have decreed certain rules and regulations for events in life that are rigidly adhered to. For instance the customs about birth and death. The childbed and the person of the newborn baby must be protected from the dead by marks made with bluing. When [the baby] is removed from this room, the open Bible must proceed to keep off the duppies, and so on. (5)

In this passage the Conjure priest/priestess uses the holy Bible¹⁵ in a Jamaican birth ritual designed to keep newborns safe from the invasion of spirits of the deceased. As a spiritually blended construct, the birth ritual is marked by the integration of the Christian holy Bible coupled with the West African belief in spirit contact.

As a travel narrative, *Tell My Horse* details the natural beauty of Haiti’s landscape and the sacred zones where African gods dwell, the good Rada and the bad Petros. Hurston gives a comprehensive description of the main gods, including their desires and their powers (113-31). She identifies the arts of music (mainly drumming) and dance as intricate elements in Haitian religious rituals. In the title chapter Hurston describes spirit possession; she says the Guede is an invisible, but powerful loa (ancestral spirit) that generally serves the oppressed classes of Haiti. A loa:

manifests himself by “mounting” a subject as a rider mounts a horse, then he speaks and acts through his mounts. The person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the loa until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit rider, the “horse” does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered unriden. (221)

These mountings allow common people to experience divine status first-hand. In *Voodoo Dreams* and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Marie and Sassafrass each reinscribe the West African cultural tradition of divine spirit possession through such “mountings.”

In addition to spirit possession, Hurston discusses the mysterious existence of zombies and the retention of African medical practices in Voodoo. She contends that she and a “physician of very high caliber”

discussed the possibility of a drug being used to produce this semblance of death. That is his theory on the matter. He said that he would give much to know the secret of it. It was his belief that many scientific truths were hidden in some of these [. . .] practices that have been brought from Africa. But the knowledge of the plants and formulae are secret [. . .] nothing will induce the guardians of these ancient mysteries to divulge them. (204-5)

In *Tell My Horse*, Hurston extends her discussion beyond supernatural issues and examines Haitian politics, observing that “the people of Haiti needed a spirit which could burlesque the society that crushed them” (200).

By challenging the French Catholic power structure, Voodoo openly addressed issues of inequity within Haitian culture. In her description of the annual waterfall ritual at Saut d’Eau, Hurston notes the discord between the official Catholic Church of Haiti and the masses of Haitians who subscribed to Voodoo:

it was a moving sight to see these people turning from sordid things once each year to go into an ecstasy of the beautiful in water-forms. Perhaps the [Catholic] priest has some good reason for attempting to break up this annual celebration at the waterfalls. I only heard that the church does not approve and so it must be stopped if possible. I fail to see where it would have been more uplifting for them to have been inside a church listening to a man urging them to “contemplate the sufferings of our Lord,” which is just another way of punishing one’s self for nothing. It is [. . .] much better for them to climb the rocks in their clean

bare feet and meet Him face to face in their search for the
eternal in beauty. (234-35)

In Haiti different forms of worship often collided at the intersection of race, culture, and ethnicity, and this passage demonstrates the French Catholic attempt to dominate and regulate religious practices in Haiti. Highlighting the inevitability of such conflict, Hurston asserts, “gods always behave like the people who make them” (219). Indeed, religion represents a culture’s attempt to explain the source of human existence and life as the members of that culture experience it. Documenting Hurston’s personal religious practices, Hemenway, her biographer, believes that she refused to divulge all the mysteries of Voodoo she discovered in her research. He cites her practice of Voodoo as a source of conflict between her responsibilities as a researcher/writer and her vows of secrecy as a Voodoo practitioner. In both anthropological texts, Hurston presents Voodoo as potent and mysterious, yet its mysteries are never, to any significant degree, crystallized in either text. Hurston’s explication of Voodoo, then, like the explication of any religion, is cloaked in mystery. Nevertheless, in both works, she is a trailblazer in the serious treatment of what I term Christio-Conjure.

As literary collages, *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* are amalgamations of sociology, topography, history, religion, politics, and poetics. Many of the passages in these texts are filled with beautiful lyricism, not the “stuff of standard speech” or “formal [academic] standards” (Dutton 145). Instead, these texts communicate playful, colorful, yet profoundly meaningful expression. Ishmael Reed characterizes the content and style of *Tell My Horse* as postmodern:

with its mixtures of techniques and genres, this book,
originally published in 1938, is bound to be the postmodern
book of the nineties. But her greatest accomplishment is in

revealing the profound beauty and appeal of a faith older than Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, a faith that has survived in spite of its horrendously bad reputation and the persecution of its followers. (xv)

In addition to Hurston's distinctive form and style, because of her legacy variations in the treatment of Conjure are widespread in African American literature. As Baker notes, Hurston's work demonstrates that "the codes of conjure" define the lives of black folk and their lore; her work also establishes that "conjure—both historically and in the narrative frames of her corpus—is most fully defined by women" (94). I contend that in African American culture, Conjure "survived" and merged with Christianity to create a new, culturally inclusive form of worship, which captured Hurston's creative imagination and spiritual devotion. Unfortunately, critics like Reed, Baker, and Pryse focus only on Hurston's treatment of Conjure and neglect her attention to Christianity.

Luisah Teish, distinctly aware of Hurston's ethnographic attention to both Christianity and Conjure, counters this neglect in her ritualistic guidebook, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (1985). In relation to Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* as mother texts, Teish's *Jambalaya* represents her ethnographic daughter text and addresses the need for more cultural research like Hurston's. Prior to publishing *Jambalaya*, Teish contemplated "what it would take to build Zora's work" and judged herself "too weak for the task" (168). Despite her modesty, Teish's work is equally as meaningful and insightful as Hurston's. While both *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* illuminate the presence of the Christio-Conjure tradition in African American and Caribbean communities early in the twentieth century, *Jambalaya* discusses the late twentieth-century form of this tradition as

it is practiced in New Orleans. Like Hurston's ethnographic work, *Jambalaya* is a literary collage of multiple forms; it includes autobiography, historical biography, social commentary, political editorial, religious philosophy, and ritualistic instruction. *Jambalaya*, however, is significant in its own right, not only because it conjoins and extends Hurston's anthropological research, but also because it offers a modern socio-literary context for the analysis of contemporary black women's Christio-Conjure fiction, further shaping this tradition both culturally and artistically.

In *Jambalaya*, Teish discusses the unfavorable characterizations of African religion in Western culture, noting how "the people who sought to oppress [its] practice" (109) were often the ones describing and defining it. As a result, African religion has been maligned as devil worship or superstition, which Teish defines as "*a belief or practice whose origin and context has been lost to us and/or is in conflict with the beliefs of the dominating culture*" (110 original emphasis). Combating the historical denigration of West African culture,¹⁶ Teish describes translocation to America:

on the slave ships, Ibos, Yorubas, Bantus, and Wolofs were thrown together [. . .]. As many as two million Africans were exported in the slave trade. And though their eating habits and manner of dress were different they nevertheless maintained two important comonalites: (1) they spoke dialects of the *Kwa* and *Bantu* languages, (2) they shared a belief in nature worship and ancestor reverence and performed similar magical practices. (104)

While this passage identifies monolithic cultural traits among major groups of Africans transported to America in the slave trade, it also illustrates West Africa's cultural diversity. Teish specifically discusses the significance of ancestor worship among these groups noting that the ancestors function as "guides, warriors and healers" (81). The

guides, she says, “help us make major decisions. The warriors defend us, give us courage and strength, and teach us the difference between caution/cowardice and courage/foolhardiness and the healers help us maintain our physical, emotional, and mental health” (80-81). This description of ancestor reverence speaks to the various roles of the ancestors in the novels by Rhodes, Ansa, Bambara, Shange, and Naylor featured in my study.

In addition to discussing ancestor reverence, Teish reveals that “Voudou has special appeal to women” (xi). Moreover, she says that Voodoo “recognizes spiritual kinship; encourages spiritual growth; respects the earth; and utilizes the power of sexuality” (xi). Teish identifies the modern practitioners of Voudou as “feminist-spiritualists” (xi) and asserts that “*Voudou is a science of the oppressed, a repository of womanknowledge*” (171 original emphasis). Here, she substantiates my claim that Christio-Conjure is a woman-centered paradigm operating as a liberatory agent in the struggle against racio-gendered oppression. Further defining Voudou as a female tradition, Teish says “the Voudou queens, the women, have always been the true leaders” (174). Furthermore, she cites Robert Tallant who reports that “Voodooism seems to have been a matriarchy almost from its first days in Louisiana;” the King, who was probably the current lover of the queen, was “a minor figure, Papa didn’t count. Mama was the entire show” (174).

Teish expressly honors the spirit of Voodoo priestess Marie LaVeau: “[w]e will reclaim one of our mothers, Mam’zelle¹⁷ Marie La Veau, and call her by her proper title. We will see ourselves in ‘true light’ and extend our hand to other women as equals, as sisters” (xiii). As well, Teish demonstrates her devotion to LaVeau:

in 1978 I made a pilgrimage to the crypt of Mam'zelle Marie La Veau, the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans.[. . .] I know a "two headed woman"¹⁸ is the favorite target of slanderers. But let the record show that Luisah Teish finds Mam'zelle Marie La Veau to be neither saint nor demon but a Mother of Spirits, an Amazon, and a Healer. She was, in my opinion, simply a woman who responded appropriately to the demands of her time with the resources available to her. (168)

Teish mediates the discord between the deification and vilification of Marie LaVeau and surmises that as a "Mother" and "Healer," LaVeau's spirit is worth of ancestral reverence.

In addition to her treatment of LeVeau, Teish also delineates the historical formation of what I call Christio-Conjure. Contending that something was missing from western religion, she says that slaves "hid beneath Mary's skirts," worshiping their own deities as they reshaped Christianity and created "Macumba and Candomble in Brazil, Lucumi in Cuba, Santeria in Puerto Rico, and Voudou or Hoodoo in Haiti and New Orleans" (103-08). Geographically dispersed, this spiritual construct is an "integrative process" (108), synonymous with Christio-Conjure as I define it. Across time and space, Christio-Conjure has been assigned various labels and "has been mislabeled, misunderstood, and exploited" (171).

Restoring its reputation, Teish's work concentrates on the Voudou of New Orleans, which she says is "like Jambalaya, a spicy dish with many fine ingredients cooked together. It blends the practices of three continents into one tradition. It contains African ancestor reverence, Native American earth worship, and European Christian occultism" (x). She further emphasizes the syncretized nature of this practice:

my altar circle, the House of the Mother, is a rainbow. We are of African, European, Middle Eastern, Latin, and

Native American traditions. I await the arrival of my sisters from the East. We are an extended family of freely organized people who practice nature worship and ancestor reverence. We are dedicated to praising, protecting, and serving Mother Earth and Her children [. . .] we prefer such terms as root woman (herbalist), ju-ju woman (magician), or two-headed woman (medium). The mother of the spirits often refers to those whom she teaches as her *omos*, her children. (251 original emphasis)

A select group of African American women novelists function as Hurston's and Teish's "*omos*"—their Christio-Conjure literary progeny. Hurston's and Teish's twentieth-century ethnographic documentation supplies the cultural frame for a host of contemporary black women fiction writers who expose Christio-Conjure's ideological import as well as further define its spiritual and ritualistic components.

Literary Conjure's Critical Discourse

Independent of its relationship to Christianity, Conjure's relationship to West African culture and tradition has received substantial critical treatment in black literary criticism. Although David Brown's article, "Conjure/Doctors: An Exploration of a Black Discourse in America, Antebellum to 1940" (1990), does not focus on black women's writing, it facilitates my argument by situating Conjure within the frame of black folklore and related Africanisms in black culture. Brown notes that within the United States Conjure "exhibited a strongly West African character in its method of making charms and medicines," while maintaining "an essential, complementary position with respect to black Christianity" (4). Further, he defines Conjure as "an idiom, an explicit, culturally specific way of thinking and talking about cause, effect, power, and agency, and as a practical, creative process of mobilizing spiritual and material resources to address problems and to affect change" (5). He charts the presence of Conjure characters and

tales in nineteenth-century slave narratives and in post-emancipation black literature (e.g., Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*) up until the 1940 publication of oral folklore collected by the Georgia writers' project. In his unique blend of literary analysis and cultural studies, Brown argues that "given the frequency and elaborateness of conjure references in the [slave narratives], African survivals, and folklore literature," the "conjure story should be considered a sub-genre of African American oral literature" (26).

While Brown omits the topic of black women's writing, Trudier Harris, in her article, "From Exile to Asylum" (1976), excludes the term "Conjure" but addresses analogous issues—female bonding, spiritual renewal, and self-healing, etc.—at the center of discourse on Conjure in black women's writing. She asserts that black female characters—including those in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Ann Allen Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983)—"reject Christianity with its masculine God and forge for themselves a new kind of religion, a new kind of communion, with a community of women" (156). She further posits that a communion with self and with other women is the pattern for most black female characters appearing in works after the mid-1970s. This communion becomes devotion, a love that borders upon worship and hence "further recovers the meaning of religion" (161). Moreover, in her analysis of *The Salt Eaters*, Harris describes the community of women in the novel as natural as well as supernatural and says Bambara draws "upon beliefs more ancient in black and Third World communities than is

Christianity to make her case for a new breed of religious experience” (165). Although Harris does not identify this alternate path to salvation explicitly as Conjure, she does acknowledge its impetus as “ancient beliefs in black” diasporic communities. In short, Harris explains that various black women characters access supreme power and salvation through acts of self-exploration and self-recreation rather than exclusively through the traditional Western medium of the Christian God.

Like Harris, Karla Holloway does not specify Conjure as her subject, but the Conjure ethos is manifest throughout *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Writing* (1992). In this work, Holloway explores African diaspora women's literature and its connection to West African culture and tradition. She says that in black women's writing, both the idea and presence of the ancestor indicate two important concepts: first, the textual preservation of a primary African culture where the ancestor and the deity can inhabit the same metaphysical space, and second, the belief that a spiritual metaphor can center the metaphysics of a creative literature (141). She notes the image of the goddess as a constant thread in the fabric of black women's texts. Further, she describes the goddess as a culturally sustaining and gender-specific creative figure whose constancy in the literature of African diasporic women indicates her distinct association with the creative traditions of women's literature.

Expanding upon Holloway's work, Gay Wilentz in *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease* (2000), explores the notion of “cultural illness” among individuals from diverse ethnic groups with histories “full of suffering” (Wilentz 1). She contends there is a “relationship between individual psychosis and ethnicity,” particularly in “[historically] despised group[s]” (1). Wilentz engages several issues relevant to my

study of Christio-Conjure. She investigates women writers' particular affinity for creating healing narratives within the novel genre, noting that women from oppressed social groups within the hegemony of a dominant culture write about the cultural base of "traditional healing" (3). Wilentz extends Deena Metzger's concept of "wellness narratives" (1) by identifying specific texts as authorial acts of cultural healing.

Like Wilentz, Houston A. Baker, Jr. discusses the theme of healing in black women's texts, but he also contextualizes the subject of Conjure within the framework of black women's literature. In *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1991), he draws the following connection: "the power of conjure to provide guidelines, controls, motivation, and remedies for a black vernacular community grow out of the ancient, authentic African origins of its practices" (93). While employing the terms hoodoo, voodoo, and conjure synonymously, Baker, like Marjorie Pryse, identifies Conjure as a gendered sphere within twentieth-century African American literature and asserts that it is most clearly defined by black women writers. Furthermore, he identifies Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Tell My Horse* (1938) as "conjure books of the first magnitude" (82) and designates *Mules and Men* as a "*locus classicus*" (72) for black women's creativity.

In addition to Baker's work, Lindsey Tucker explicates the fine nuances of meaning that often confound researchers of Conjure in her article, "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*" (1994). She discusses the role of ancestry in Conjure studies. She notes that historically, Conjure women were purported to be closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. Also, she says Conjure abilities appear to run in families in

which expertise in herbal medicine is handed down from generation to generation (176). She reports that Conjure women, who often carry the name *Mother*, exercise considerable power in their communities and almost without exception possess a second sight (i.e., are gifted with psychic abilities). Further, she specifies the three kinds of illnesses treated by Conjure: 1) illness for which a knowledge of roots, herbs, barks, and teas is applied; 2) occult or spiritually connected illness that requires spell-casting and charms; and 3) illness that includes both personal and collective calamities that are not the result of malevolent practices (178). Within the context of her Conjure research, Tucker offers an extensive discussion of Naylor's title character, Mama Day, in her textual role as Conjure woman.

Similar to Tucker, Valerie Lee, in *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (1996), makes a connection between Conjure, historical grannies (i.e., lay midwives, indigenous midwives, traditional birth attendants, or folk or common midwives), and their literary representations. She postulates that "in her multiple roles as midwife, herbalist, and traditional healer, the literary granny is a character with an eclectic profession and an electric presence" through which black women writers address the politics of identity, race, and class (9). Moreover, she claims that African American women writers choose lay midwives and women healers as pivotal characters in order to engage "the complexities of a socio-literary process" (9). Lee employs the term "*sistah* conjurer" in recognition of the multiple roles, versatility, and African heritage of the grannies and writers who are engaged in a "curative transformation of reality" (12).

Like Lee, Pryse and Spillers, in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary*

Tradition (1985), also discuss the of notion black women writers as literary Conjure women, and their work is perhaps the most widely recognized undertaking in this regard. In its introduction, Pryse contends that nineteenth-century women writers “preserved biological lineage and connection by telling their stories as autobiographies or slave narratives [and] made fiction writing possible for black women” (3). She traces the history of African American women’s literature by exploring the contradiction of “connection within a heritage of separation” (3). Her introduction is useful for its historical context, identifying a tradition in African American literature founded by women who achieved literacy despite the restrictions of slavery and recorded their stories long before emancipation (4). It also underscores the significance of oral translation in African American literature. Noting the recurring theme of Conjure, Pryse asserts that

black women novelists have become literary conjure women [. . .] who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors [. . .]. By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our assumption about the nature and function of literary tradition. (5)

Thus, Pryse suggests that black women writers themselves develop the notion of conjuring as a literary and creative act, offering a framework for the critical assessment of African American women writers and their literature.

At present, these studies by Brown, Harris, Holloway, Wilentz, Baker, Tucker, and Lee comprise the bulk of critical discourse featuring the grandnarrative of Conjure in African American literature. While most reference, as cursory commentary, the blending of Western and African cultures, none foreground a cultural synthesis as the foundation

of their literary readings. Of all the critical analyses, Tucker's article offers the most balanced treatment of Christianity and Conjure as they converge within a text. But her interpretation, like the others, privileges Conjure over Christianity, as evidenced in the title itself, "Recovering the Conjure Woman." In black women's writing, I submit that Conjure, in many instances, represents merely half of the thematic equation; the second factor is Christianity.¹⁹ While the literature reflects the conflated heritage of enslaved Africans forced to revise their religious practices, the critical analysis of the literature obfuscates this syncretism. Transplanted in America, the worship of Africans contained not only a vision (interpretation) of the spirit (one's ethereal self), but it also involved a (re)vision of the spirit, a second and new vision building upon the first.

Historical Overview

Although a symbiotic relationship exists between literary and historical Christio-Conjure, its historical evolution is a separate and distinct subject from its literary treatment; thus, the critical analysis of historical Christio-Conjure warrants a separate discussion. In America, Christio-Conjure developed as African religious practices were introduced to European forms of worship. However, enslaved Africans in America not only encountered new forms of European culture and religion, they also met new varieties of African people too:

given the social setting of early New World colonies, the encounters of Africans from a score or more different societies with each other, and with their European overlords, cannot be interpreted in terms of two [. . .] "bodies" of belief and value, each coherent, functioning and intact. (Mintz and Price 18)

In this passage, Mintz and Price discourage essentializing African culture and illustrate

the simple point that no all-encompassing, transcontinental African culture exists. The languages, religions, and politics of the African continent were—and still remain—as diverse as on any other continent. I, however, categorize various metaphysical principles (i.e., mind control and spirit contact) and conventions (i.e., natural healing and ancestor reverence) as “West African” because among the Akan-Ashanti, the Dahomeans, the Yoruba of western Nigeria, and the Bini of eastern Nigeria—areas of West Africa that constitute the core of the American slaving belt—such collective beliefs and practices are especially pervasive (Herskovits 61). The Conjure component of Christio-Conjure—i.e., the spiritual Africanisms—of this project exists predominantly as a vestige of these West African cultures. This is not to suggest, however, that details of worship and religious practice do not differ among various West African groups.

Throughout my project, I classify and metaphorically reference the aforementioned spiritual West Africanisms as Conjure,²⁰ since historically their practice has been labeled—among other things—Conjure and its practitioners as Conjurers. According to Robert E. Hemenway, Conjure has “historically produced an access to power for a powerless people. It is an alternate mode of perceiving reality, contrasting sharply with what is perceived as the white man’s excessive rationality” (119). Myriad expressions for Conjure abound, e.g., black folk religion, voodoo, hoodoo, magic, sorcery, the supernatural, the occult, witchcraft, spell-casting, root-working, trick-playing, charming, goophering, etc. Tucker explains that although “conjure appears synonymous with witchcraft, rootwork, and voodoo,” the variety of labels is related to the geographic specificity of the practices; “Haitian *voodoo* and Cuban *Santeria*”²¹ differ from Jamaican “*obeah*” (177). The former, she says, are religious systems with rituals

and ceremonies and the latter involves a client and a worker.

True to its mythical identity as a melting pot, the United States is a site of blended Conjure practices, for enslaved Africans grouped together in the United States gradually formed a specialized identity, one uniquely African American:

[i]n the new physical and social environment [. . .] African men and women of various ethnic groups mixed in ways that did not occur in Africa. Similarly the varied African cultures were increasingly fused into new combinations that did not exist in Africa. A new culture, predominantly African in origin, but different from any *particular* African culture, began to take shape. (“Believer,” Joyner 18 original emphasis)

Because vestiges of West African spirituality in American culture have been filtered, to a significant degree, through the Caribbean islands as well as Central and South America, Conjure practice in the United States varies and may present itself as either or both religious practice and/or business exchange between client and practitioner.

Since 1517, when Bishop Bartolomeo de Las Casas sanctioned “immigration to the New World by permitting Spaniards to import African slaves, the trading of men in the New World formally began” (Franklin and Moss 32). In America, enslaved Africans were forced to adapt to a new form of worship—Christianity. Charles Jones, in *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (1842), urged the master-class to implement Christianity as a tool of social control and listed these benefits:

- (1) better understanding of the relations of master and servant and of reciprocal duties;
- (2) the pecuniary interests of masters will be advanced;
- (3) increased safety;
- (4) the promotion of morality and religion of the master;
- (5) much unpleasant discipline will be saved by the churches;
- (6) the souls of our servants will be saved. (qtd. in Simpson 221)

As such, “Christianizing,” to a large extent, was an “issue of domination through religious influence” (Washington 49), which some believed to be “a more subtle, more humane, and more effective means of control than the whip” (“Believer,” Joyner 22). In *Suggestions on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the Southern States*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publications in 1847, missionaries were urged to ignore the civil condition “of the slave and to listen to no complaints against masters or overseers” (Simpson 221). While preaching to the bondsmen, missionaries were advised to condemn “every vice and evil custom,” advocate the “discharge of every duty,” and “support the peace and order of society” (221). Furthermore, they were asked to teach the slaves to give “respect and obedience [to] all those whom God in his providence has placed in authority over them” (221).

Joyner discusses the “slaveholders’ theological dilemma,” noting that the “idea of equality before God created a problem of role boundaries and emphasized tensions and anomalies within the institution of slavery that could not be ignored” (“Believer” 24-25). During the religious instruction of slaves, the slave-holding class emphasized certain sections of the Bible like the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, but blacks found other passages more compelling. Often, Christianity was the faith they

turned to for strength in the constant times of need. In the Old Testament story of the enslavement of the Hebrews by the Egyptians they found their own story. In the figure of Jesus Christ, they found someone who had suffered as they had suffered, someone who had understood, someone who offered them rest from their suffering. (Connor 25)

Several passages of the Old Testament seemed to address directly the wretched plight of enslaved African Americans. The book of Exodus,²² for example, replete with its

inspirational liberation motif was particularly apropos for those worshiping in bondage.

Tracing the course of African American Christianity, George Simpson reports that evangelical religion developed mass appeal among the untutored masses, both white and black, on the colonial frontier in North America. He notes that during the Great Awakenings (1720-1740 and 1790-1815), Methodists and Baptists converted large numbers of blacks, and the fervor of the Second Awakening helped bolster a sense of identity among the slaves (19). As for the Second Awakening, Rosemary Ruether asserts that “this new evangelical fervor came at a crucial time in the social life of the country. The United States was emerging from a period of anticlericalism and into one of social and cultural disintegration” (156). As well, during the late nineteenth century African American women fought racial and economic battles *vis-à-vis* active membership in religious and social organizations. According to Ruether, nineteenth-century black women “espoused a profound spirituality forged from the twin hearths of African cosmology and evangelical piety” (158). Thus, in the hands of African Americans, the “rich and enduring” Christian faith was fashioned into a distinct new form: “the cosmology of the slaves during the 1600s and 1700s was a universe crafted from a blend of West African religions with Christianity” (155).

While white missionaries and ministers prohibited religious dancing and shouting, nonetheless, slaves participated in these activities privately during clandestine gatherings.²³ Further illuminating the blended religious ideology of black Americans, Ruether posits,

when left alone, slave worship contained the West African notion of the forces of the universe, both evil and good. Both were at hand and available for consultation and for protection. Also present was the Christian God who would

send a man to set the slaves free as Moses had confronted Pharaoh to set Hebrew slaves free. This was a God who was not wholly transcendent but immanent as well. (155)

While illustrating “Africanized” biblical interpretation common among black Christians, Ruether’s comments also demonstrate the co-existence of West African beliefs in black religion.

Echoing Ruether’s observations, Genovese reports, “Voodoo arose with the arrival of slaves from Africa and the West Indies,” and it “fuse[d] with Christian beliefs and probably reached its height in the 1850s” (220). Baker says Conjure combined with French colonial Catholicism and “became the dominant religion of the masses in Haiti and a powerful and pervasive force among the African population in New Orleans [. . .]. And voodoo or conjure, has been an active presence since that time until the present” (80). This blending of European and West African religious tradition by blacks in America is “neither a dark version of Christianity” nor “a continuation of African religion disguised as Christianity,” but the “unique creative synthesis of both” (“Believer,” Joyner 19). As a source of strength and endurance, Christio-Conjure enabled blacks “to triumph over the collective tragedy of enslavement” (37) and has continued to grow, transform, and serve the spiritual needs of its followers. In addition to its cultural evolution in America, Christio-Conjure has also evolved within the artistic sphere of African American literature, wherein the black female subject (the writer as well as her female characters) emerges from a past of historical oppression into a present of cultural prominence.

Contemporary Christio-Conjure Fiction

The following chapters feature select novels viewed through the critical lens of

Christio-Conjure. Hurston and Teish's research offers a defining framework for the elements of Christio-Conjure integrated in each. The novels include characters that participate in various aspects of Christio-Conjure, including the worship of the Christian God, Christ, Virgin Mary, and/or patron saints and simultaneous belief in goddess worship, ancestor reverence, divine possession, and natural healing. From chapter to chapter, my discussion advances spatially following the geographic route of the setting of each novel. The southern-most point of the discussion features nineteenth-century Louisiana in Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams*, then shifts northeast to Georgia in 1949 in Ansa's *Baby of the Family* and Georgia in the late 1970s in Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. My analysis then moves northeast again to South Carolina in the late 1960s in Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Thereafter, the discussion flows east to the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, on the eve of the second millennium in Naylor's *Mama Day*. Ultimately, in the conclusion, although the discussion remains geographically situated in the Sea Islands, Julie Dash's film script, *Daughters of the Dust's* turn-of-the-century setting facilitates a cyclical return to the beginning of the century, 1902. The discussion is deliberately organized to emphasize the fictional representation of Christio-Conjure in various locales during different periods in American history.

In chapter two, "Christio-Conjure as Historical Fiction," I discuss Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau*, a novel that offers the most compelling assessment of the black woman as Christio-Conjure priestess. In chapter three, "Christio-Conjure and the Ghost Story," I examine Ansa's *Baby of the Family*, a novel featuring the Christio-Conjure tenet of matrilineage as well as the ritualistic cultural transmission of *mother wit* as African American folk wisdom. Chapter four, "Revolutionary Christio-

Conjure,” addresses the revolutionary aspects of Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, a novel that highlights African American communal transformation and afrofemcentric bonding. Chapter five, “Christio-Conjure Activism,” features an examination of Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, in which the title characters serve as proverbial *soul sistahs* who employ Christio-Conjure as a tool of personal self-actualization and as a source of communal healing and empowerment. In chapter six, “Christio-Conjure Romance and Magic,” I analyze the love story of Cocoa and George against the backdrop of Naylor’s revision of the holy trinity in *Mama Day*. All five texts featured in this study are liberation tales, and the female characters in each appropriate Christio-Conjure as a liberating force in their lives.

In addition to liberation narratives, these novels are also texts of subversion. In *The Slave Community*, historian John Blassingame discusses African cultural retention as a method of psychological subversion employed by the oppressed class of Africans enslaved in America; one such element of African retention was the belief in Conjure. Hence, the Conjuror was able to rend power from the slaveholder and supplant his authority. Based upon faith in Conjure, many “slaves constructed a psychological defense against total dependence on and submission to their masters” (Blassingame 45). Like conjuring during slavery, Christio-Conjure functions as a form of resistance in black women’s writing.

In addition to the trope of mysticism intrinsic in the Christio-Conjure paradigm, the matriarchal principles upon which the paradigm is constructed allow female characters to subvert male authority as well as other forms of racio-gendered oppression. Furthermore, I submit that the authors, themselves, employ elements of Christio-Conjure

in their texts as a reaffirmation of their cultural and literary heritage. As a focal point, then, Christio-Conjure functions as a centering mechanism in contemporary twentieth-century black women's writing, a body of literature historically marginalized. Pryse suggests we employ the Conjure paradigm as a method of exploring African American women writers as literary Conjure women. She asserts that

Black women novelists have become literary conjure women [. . .] who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, rootworkers, and women who wrote autobiographies) [. . .]. By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers have enlarged our assumption about the nature and function of literary tradition. (5)

Expanding Pryse's idea of literary Conjure women, more specifically, I propose that the writers fashion themselves as literary Christio-Conjure women. From Zora Neale Hurston to Julie Dash, these women writers have inscribed virtually a century-long tradition of literary Christio-Conjure. Employing the medium of film, Dash, whom I analyze in the conclusion, places herself within a continuum of metaphorical literary Christio-Conjure women who, through their art, invoke their African diasporic ancestors—literary, literal, and otherwise. For almost a century, African American women writers have relied upon the Christio-Conjure paradigm as a means of communicating and relating their cultural experiences. Rhodes, Ansa, Bambara, Shange, Naylor, and Dash have reserved their spaces within the lineage of African American women writers described above by Pryse. By summoning their creative energies to produce texts that draw upon the cultural lessons of the past, these artists serve as advocates for the mental, physical, and spiritual survival/empowerment of women of the African diaspora.

CHAPTER 2: CHRISTIO-CONJURE AS HISTORICAL FICTION

Overview: Mam'zelle Marie

In 1994 Jewell Parker Rhodes responded to Hurston and Teish's ethnographic work with her debut novel, *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Laveau*. In the novel, Rhodes narrates a fictional biography of the title character, the historical, legendary Voodoo priestess of New Orleans. Unlike the novels by Ansa, Bambara, Shange, and Naylor, in which some aspects of Christio-Conjure are inconspicuous, in *Voodoo Dreams* Christio-Conjure dominates the narrative with each of the main characters *practicing* Christio-Conjure (however genuinely or disingenuously). But it is their *faith/belief* in the religious ideology, or lack thereof, that ultimately distinguishes them from one another. Throughout *Voodoo Dreams*, John and Marie are invariably constrained and enabled by the sway of Christio-Conjure. John, for example, practices Christio-Conjure without ever acquiring sincere faith in it; he is a con artist like Chesnutt's Julius. In contrast, the generations of Laveau women—particularly the protagonist—practice Christio-Conjure and constantly sustain an evolving and expanding faith in the blended spiritual construct.

Set in the mid-nineteenth-century, Rhodes' novel traces the events in the life of the title character from childhood in Teché, Louisiana to adulthood in New Orleans¹ where she is deified by thousands—black and white, wealthy and penniless alike. As in Naylor's *Mama Day*, which I discuss in chapter six, the *Voodoo Dreams* storyline is based upon an historical figure² who “was a free woman of color who flourished and became a legend and power in a racist, segregated society;” this “substantiates the vitality and strength of her will,” and “her influence lives on in the religion she helped create and formalize” (Klein 101-02). I make the connection to Naylor because within the pages of

Mama Day, Sapphira is true-to-life and is given a textual reality. Though Naylor crafts a fictitious character and Rhodes relies on the lived reality of Marie Laveau, both novels are fictional biographies. More importantly, the foundations of their stories strike similar chords and taken together challenge the dichotomy between lived and textual histories in the same way that *Christio-Conjure* disrupts the division between superstition and traditional faith.

Providing “the interplay of history and developing female identities, enlivened by individual improvisation,” *Voodoo Dreams*, as historical fiction, explores the “necessity of knowing and coming to terms with [. . .] history to construct tenable black female identities” (Kubitschek 7-9). Indeed, Marie Laveau is a striking figure upon which to graft the historically revised image of the black female. Teish asserts that Marie Laveau’s legend “has taken on mythical proportions” (186-87). Laveau and her female descendants, through word and deed orchestrated a fusion of their African past and their Christian present, a merger exemplifying the syncretism of *Christio-Conjure*. Rhodes’ fictional biography pays homage to the legacy of *Christio-Conjure* that generations of historical Laveau women inscribed upon the religious practices of their time and beyond.

Although the historical Marie Laveau resided expressly in New Orleans, she is credited with the popularization and spread of *Christio-Conjure* throughout Louisiana. In *Jambalaya*, Teish discusses Laveau’s great effort to syncretize Voodoo (or Conjure) and Catholicism; Laveau blended the worship of Voodoo gods with Catholic saints: St. Peter became Legba, St. Michael was Blanc Dani, St. John became the son of the goddess Chango; “the Catholic Church ‘cooperated,’³ [and by] 1863 the St. Louis Cathedral, the French quarter temple, was the most highly integrated church in the state” (178).

Genovese explains that historically West Africans believed in a Supreme God and a body of specific gods (210). As well, he discusses similarities between West African religious tradition and Catholicism, noting that one “reached the Supreme God through an appeal” to a “lesser god, much as Catholics reach God by an appeal for the intercession of the saints or the Virgin Mary” (210). The ideological similarities between West African religions and Catholicism made conversion to Catholicism for vast numbers of African Americans more plausible than conversion to Protestantism. The point here is not to suggest that when introduced to Protestantism, blacks of West African descent did not convert, quite the contrary. Instead, the point is to underscore the *pre-existing* similarities between West African and Catholic faiths. Laveau’s introduction of the West African pantheon of gods to the French Catholic saints resulted in a relatively amiable union, since the two religious constructs maintained similar divine principles.

Unlike Naylor’s Mama Day, who employs her Christio-Conjure powers for neither profit nor pay, the historical Marie Laveau is famous for commodifying Christio-Conjure:

[i]t appears that after emancipation some Conjurers were keenly preoccupied with the potential commodification of the occult arts [. . .] which suggests that they were beset with concerns for economic security. Many of the accounts indicate that post-bellum Conjurers were ingenious individuals who had shrewdly pedaled their craft. With the dramatic shift in the south from a slave system of black dependence and suppressed initiative to an economy of free labor and increased opportunity, the Conjuror was subtly transformed as well, into a sort of self-reliant, sacred entrepreneur who was able to adapt to the new needs and interests of the freedperson’s community. (Chireau 58)

Christio-Conjure “was one of the few avenues to power and economic potential for blacks,” and due to Laveau’s “marketing skills” (Bodin 22) it became increasingly

popular. Frequently, Laveau was seen at public events and capitalized on the public's fascination with the Congo Square activities (22). Moreover, her "talent for the theatrical, her business acumen, and her personal charisma [. . .] helped propel her to prominence" (21). She was "New Orleans' first prominent businesswoman—who charged curious whites \$10 a head for admittance to mass rituals on the lakefront. She ran a thriving consulting business, selling potions and gris-gris⁴ bags to the wealthy" (Brooks 45). But Laveau was not without competition. In fact, while slaves participated in legally banned clandestine voodoo gatherings, Laveau's contemporary, Dr. John,⁵ a free man of color, "advertised himself as a voodoo and charged Creoles to make talismans and place and lift curses [. . .]. He was soon overshadowed by Voodoo queen Marie Laveau" (45). Drawing upon John and Marie, characters plucked from the pages of history, Rhodes weaves a tale filled with historical fact and mesmerizing fictional fantasy in her novel that features a tumultuous liaison between these African American cultural legends.

In *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes inverts the traditional role of Christianity as a tool of oppression employed by the master class against subjugated blacks in antebellum Louisiana. Christianity coupled with Conjure becomes a tool of spiritual and psychological empowerment for blacks in the novel. First, the black characters must overcome racist appropriations of Christianity that assert its cultural superiority over West African religious tradition. Marie, for example, notes the affluence of the Catholic Church; the cathedral displays its wealth with gold crosses inlaid with pearl, velvet covered pews, and a marble altar encrusted with gold, rubies, and diamonds. In this space, Marie feels "intensely the power and wealth of the Catholic Church" (Rhodes

107). Her task is to struggle against the misuse of power in the Catholic Church and to convert that power, combining it with Conjure, into a healing force for the oppressed masses.

As protagonist, Marie contends with white, patriarchal authority and condescension from Father Christophe, the Catholic priest who relies upon a racist interpretation of the biblical Hamitic⁶ curse to maintain that “[s]lavery and servitude are tools of God” (110). Here, Christianity’s role as a socially oppressive force is crystalized. Marie not only battles against the overt use of religion as a tool of oppression, but she also resists more subtle, insidious religious implications like those promoted by Louis, a white journalist infatuated with Marie. Although he is primarily portrayed as a Northern liberal, Louis’s belief that Christianity “civilizes people who are unable to think rationally on their own” (240), aligns him with the elitism espoused by Father Christophe. Marie employs Christio-Conjure throughout the text to respond to overt and covert elitism.

Certainly, Catholicism’s role in *Voodoo Dreams* as an oppressive force is one example why it alone—without Conjure, the original faith of the oppressed—cannot sufficiently serve the spiritual needs of its followers. An additional impetus for blending Catholicism and Conjure in the novel is the need to balance the former’s suffering motif—conveyed through the image of crucifixion—with the latter’s devotion to overcoming obstacles, rather than passively suffering through the misfortunes and injustices. Marie implements the strength and power of the Catholic Church, tempering the condescending, arrogant nature of its “perfect and remote” (241) deity—e.g., the Christian God—with the accessible nature of Conjure tradition, featuring gods with

human qualities and character flaws that make “people [feel] less alienated” (212). Although *Voodoo Dreams* contains moments of rupture between Christianity and Conjure, ultimately in the text this conflict is dispelled. This chapter explicitly focuses on Grandmère, John, and Marie. These characters each demonstrate aspects of Christio-Conjure in Rhodes “healing narrative” (Wilentz 1). Rhodes not only depicts the individual, psychological healing of the protagonist Marie, but she also depicts the expansive group healing of Laveau’s patrons who, through Christio-Conjure, transcend a history “full of suffering” (1 Wilentz).

Grandmère

As the novel opens, Marie’s aging grandmother, Grandmère, struggles to determine which gods rightfully deserve her worship. Whites and their Christian God seemingly have dominated her life. Although she transforms into an archetypal Christio-Conjure character, ultimately reclaiming the power of Conjure and pairing it with Christianity, Grandmère’s faith is first tested by the brutality of life in antebellum New Orleans. As she reminisces about being young and pregnant with Maman, Marie’s mother, Grandmère reveals: “Master drowned Sachwaw before your Maman was born. White men and white gods have always been more powerful” (334). The events surrounding Maman’s death are inextricably linked to the issue of religion as an oppressive force. Grandmère recalls the night of Maman’s murder: “‘right in front of the Roman Catholic church [. . .]. White people, white gods, were—*are* dangerous [. . .]. They tied her to a tree. Whipped her [. . .]. Damballah⁷ wasn’t strong enough to save her.’ Grandmère sang, ‘Were you there when they crucified my child?’ The melody was haunting” (336-7 original emphasis). Grandmère connects Maman to Christ, describing

her death as a “crucifixion.” She also describes whites and the Christian religion as “more powerful” and “dangerous,” as she recounts the savage brutality of the pious Christian mob. Grandmère associates her personal practice of Voodoo/Conjure with emotional anguish, presuming the West African gods are weaker than the Christian god since “Damballah wasn’t strong enough to save” Maman; thus, her resolution to pray “to white people” ostensibly is based upon fear. Grandmère’s spirit is broken by the tragic events of her life, and out of sheer defenselessness, “the day her daughter die[s] [she] convert[s] to Catholicism” (40). Although Membe, Grandmère’s slave mother, taught her there were “African spirits in wood, iron, and the sea,” Grandmère casts aside the Voodoo/Conjure faith. She tries to escape the painful memories of her life in New Orleans by raising her granddaughter, Marie, in the small town of Teché.

Even in Teché, however, Grandmère is filled with remorse because she “managed the child poorly” (35). Hiding in the bayou, Marie grows restless. Grandmère believes Marie needs a husband to “calm her” (35). As Grandmère envisions her future, she speculates that, “If [. . .] lucky, she’d live long enough to see her great-granddaughter born,” thereafter, she would die “comfortably [. . .] as Jesus stood by” (35). In order to find “a husband to calm” Marie, Grandmère posits an inevitable return to New Orleans with “Jesus” standing by. Grandmère’s motive for returning to New Orleans is two-fold: in addition to finding Marie a suitable mate, she seeks the reassurance of the Christian God in New Orleans where she originally practiced Voodoo/Conjure. In other words, she desires Christian protection in the Conjure-based space of New Orleans. There, she hopes to gain a sense of peace and protection for herself and Marie. Essentially, she wants the Christian God to reward her earlier privileging of Christianity over Conjure.

Although Grandmère eventually sees her abandonment of Christianity as a foolish mistake, she believed going to New Orleans would prove “Christ loved her. Prove He’d defend her in New Orleans as payment for her years of faith. And if Christ wouldn’t save her, surely His mother, the holy Virgin, would. Surely a woman would understand and protect her virgin granddaughter” (40). Emphasizing the shared worship of female deities, Grandmère’s symbolic appeal to the holy Virgin reiterates Catholicism’s greater degree of compatibility with West African religion in contrast to Protestantism. As well, her entreaty to the Virgin Mary intimates Grandmère’s woman-centered predilection and foreshadows her ultimate conversion to Christio-Conjure.

In New Orleans, despite her Christian posturing, Grandmère’s Voodoo/Conjure past quickly resurfaces because “everyone reveres [her] like a Goddess [. . .] a Saint [. . .] a woman of great power” (101). Her former followers in New Orleans remember her as a grand Voodoo priestess, and her abandonment of Voodoo is viewed by the black community as neglect of “Damballah [. . .] and the black gods [. . .]. Grandmère had accepted Ham’s curse and favored white saints. Now she’d cursed Annette’s baby with her sins, her blasphemies against Voodoo, against dark people” (115). Grandmère’s lack of faith in Voodoo is identified as the source of the community’s strife. Nattie chastises her: “I no understand you. You let John lead us” (105). Grandmère recounts the origin of her painful, tangled history with John explaining that they “fought many a night but he always backed down [. . .]. John was charming [. . .] strong, seemingly invincible. John fell in love with [Maman]. [. . .] He was twenty, she was eight” (333). Grandmère recalls John’s role in Maman’s demise, and having recently returned to New Orleans, she continues to counter his menacing presence in the community.

Although Nattie is disturbed by Grandmère's abandonment of Conjure, complaining to her: "you no longer give to your people" (105), Grandmère confronts John and demonstrates that she has not completely abandoned her original spiritual ideology. She warns John, "tonight I'll curse you to both God *and* Damballah. My power to conjure isn't gone" (117 original emphasis). In the Conjure space of New Orleans Grandmère reverts to her original system of belief. Although she previously advocates staunch Catholicism, during the height of the communal crisis inflicted by John, she instinctively calls on both her faiths as a source of empowerment. Though she attempts to sever these faiths, as an archetypal Christio-Conjure character, she eventually resolves the warring religious tension in her life by fully subscribing to a blended religious ideology.

John

Throughout *Voodoo Dreams*, there is constant negotiation between the concepts of good and evil, for Christianity and Conjure—both separately and combined—are employed throughout the novel benevolently and malevolently, with the flux grounded in the politics of race and gender. As a variation of the gendered politics represented by Hurston and Chesnutt, the fluctuation here is not intertextual, it is intratextual, between male and female characters within the text, with the women wielding the true forms of spiritual power. Since Christio-Conjure, in literary terms, is preeminently created by, for, and about black women, the powerful image of the Christio-Conjure high priestess in black women's literature functions as a metaphorical inversion of the oppression historically suffered by black women.

John, in *Voodoo Dreams*, like Dr. Buzzard, the male Conjuror in *Mama Day*, is a scam artist who sells various “charms and spells” (189) to his clientele. However, unlike the ineffectual Dr. Buzzard, John represents a far more diabolical character. He is the personification of evil, “a dark avenging demon” (149). Yet his abuse of Christio-Conjure is contextualized within the frame of his own victimization; he is psychologically demented and spiritually void because of the brutality he experiences during his captivity and enslavement. John lacks faith in any god, black or white because he believes life is too harsh to justify religion. Sailing in a slave ship, “lying in his and others’ waste, he wondered, “[h]ow could his [. . .] *loas*, have allowed it?” (206 original emphasis). While the other captives called upon Damballah, Legba and Agwé,⁸ “[n]othing changed. The ship [. . .] sailed on to the auction block and slavery” (207). For John, sincere faith under these circumstances is incomprehensible, and his experiences condition him to be a ruthless and faithless manipulator of Christio-Conjure.

When he meets Grandmère and Maman, he devises an iniquitous plan to profit from Grandmère’s venerable reputation as a Voodooiene⁹ through the image of her young daughter. But he “never dreamed the daughter [. . .] would get herself killed” (127). Since John’s original scheme is thwarted by Maman’s death, “[h]e couldn’t quite forgive Damballah for favoring women with His powers” (127). Fully cognizant of his moral deficiency and lack of religious fortitude, John’s only prospect for acquiring prestige and wealth is to use Marie as his Christio-Conjure spiritual vessel.

He knows his lack of success in Christio-Conjure represents a gender-based barrier. Wishing he had been “born a woman” (140), John longs for the power only a woman in this tradition can possess. Like Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius and Naylor’s Dr.

Buzzard, John's conjuring ability is limited to chicanery/trickery, and is thus invested with no genuine power. Building upon Hurston and Teish's afrofemcentric characterizations, Rhodes portrays Christio-Conjure as the province of black women. Highly embittered, John transforms into a desperate and pathetic character and bemoans, "If Damballah was real, he would've come to me" (314). Believing that he should have felt some spirit or power, John is "bewildered. His palms [. . .] outstretched like a beggar needing alms" (314). John symbolically curses the afrofemcentric nature of West African spirituality, reiterating the text's ever-present gendered rift and foreshadowing the inevitable power struggle between he and Marie.

In addition to serving as a recurring theme in black women's writing, the notion of the evil Conjuror—personified by John in *Voodoo Dreams*—is also an historically documented cultural phenomenon (Chireau 134). As a "harming practitioner," John uses his "powers for personal advancement" (Chireau 134). Unlike Grandmère, who employs her status as priestess in the dedicated and humble capacity of community servant, John wishes to exploit his spiritual followers. Grandmère recalls that "John wanted to collect money. He said it didn't make sense that we were so poor. 'New World thinking' I kept saying 'Not African.' Membe never took money" (Rhodes 333). As he gains control over Marie, he functions as a first-rate capitalist, justifying the collection of money during Marie's ceremonies¹⁰ by smugly reminding her, "the Catholic Church collects money" (203). He insists that, "this is a business. It doesn't matter what Damballah will or won't do. Your power is more inside people's minds than inside you [. . .]. All you need to do is keep people afraid" (222). Indeed, John's mode of operation keeps "people

afraid,” and the fear-as-a-mechanism-of-control motif ultimately extends from John’s business savvy into his personal relationship with Marie.

A cruel and perverted man, John exploits Marie’s reputation as a fourth generation Voodooiense. He is merciless in his attempt to control all aspects of her existence, and his abuse is excessive. He slams her head into a headboard and he threatens her: “Remember—I am the King [. . .] I could kill you [. . .]. You’ll do as I tell you [. . .]. I’ll kill Grandmère” (158-59). Clearly, John personifies gendered oppression in the text, and as he malevolently manipulates the power of Christio-Conjure, Marie is the victim of his sexual and psychological exploitation. Ironically, John’s tool of oppression—Christio-Conjure—is Marie’s tool of liberation, and despite his incessant threats, eventually, “John saw Marie’s defiance” and “realized that the girl, Marie, had become a Voodoo Queen, but he hadn’t become a King. Before thousands, she was stealing his triumph, his power” (367). John’s epiphany is critical because it signifies a turning point in his twisted alliance with Marie and a shift in the balance of power in their relationship. Finally, he must face the stark reality that Marie is acquiring a following and force far beyond his control and command. More significantly, Marie is developing a burgeoning sense of self and an awareness of her latent potential for spiritual wholeness and fulfillment in the absence of John’s tyrannical rule.

Marie

Although Saint Marie, as her followers address her, is worshipped as a deity in her adult life, her personal evolution is filled with pain and suffering. Similar to Lena in *Baby of the Family*, Velma in *The Salt Eaters*, Sassafrass and Cypress in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, and Cocoa in *Mama Day*, Marie is disconnected from her cultural

roots and severed from the spiritual traditions to which she is heir. Throughout the text, Marie implores her grandmother: “Please. I need to know who I am. I need to know about Maman [. . .]. Tell me about you” (103). But Grandmère remains silent, rendering Marie inexplicably motherless. In addition, Marie is plagued by recurring dreams and cannot decode their cryptic messages. In order for Marie to “*uncover* herself” (80 added emphasis) she must *discover* her spiritual lineage and history.

Nattie is the first person to help Marie in this regard; she recounts the tumultuous relationship between John and Maman, highlighting John’s incessant infidelity. Out of spite, she says, Maman has an affair with a white man and becomes pregnant, which only heightens John’s indiscretions. Distraught over John’s disregard and disrespect, Nattie says, “Grandmère had to tie [Maman] down to keep her from ripping you out of her womb” (160). Marie’s despondency worsens as she begins reconstructing her past with the disturbing account of her conception provided by Nattie. Emotionally vulnerable, Marie succumbs to John and allows him to “guide her away” (117) on two levels: *physically* away from Grandmère and *psychologically* away from genuine spiritual growth and development. Though emotionally vulnerable, Marie is never misguided by the lure of John’s promise of power and fame. As such, she initiates her quest for identity within the context of a power struggle with John, inherited from her mother who was also his lover.

In addition to confronting the issue of motherlessness, Marie’s healthy emotional development is further impeded by a sense of competition with the spirit of Maman. Possessing her body, Maman, long deceased, lives again through Marie: “*two minds in one body*” (123 original emphasis). In this mimetic state, Marie, like Lena in *Baby of the*

Family, experiences ancestral spirit possession. But for Marie the very spirit of her mother represents a competitor vying for John's romantic attention. Therefore, Marie begins to resist possession altogether, both ancestral and divine: "she wanted to confess to someone—a woman—why she kept Maman's spirit at bay and how she didn't know any way to ward off Maman without also excluding Damballah" (134). As in *Baby of the Family*, spirit possession creates a sense of unrest in the protagonist, but unlike Lena, Marie's situation is further complicated by her desire to maintain *divine* possession, a sacred and honored element of Christio-Conjure.

Marie panics when she feels Maman's spirit trying to possess her because she does not "want to compete with a ghost" (139) for John's attention. Emotionally desperate, she clings to John, but their relationship further disrupts the healthy construction of her identity. She notes that "*John was a distraction from the hard work of finding*" herself (152 original emphasis); as well, she eventually admits, "*from the moment I entered his arms, I started to die. Just like my Maman*" (118 original emphasis). Under John's tyranny she feels like "everything about herself [is] a nightmare. There [isn't] any real Marie LaVeau" (131). As Marie continues her quest for identity, she broadens her search beyond the convoluted relationship she shares with John and begins a quest for spiritual fulfillment. Since she never achieves spiritual fulfillment through her separate participation in Christianity and Voodoo, Marie explores Christio-Conjure the syncretized construct of Christio-Conjure.

In her conscious attempt to reformulate her religious practice, Marie is similar to Indigo in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* who "made up what she needed" (Shange 5). Marie ultimately discerns that her religious faith, and that of her followers, requires a

blended form of spirituality. Initially, however, her development and implementation of Christio-Conjure is neither a blessed nor sacred phenomenon, and despite her popularity, she is filled with misery. Relatively ignorant of the tradition into which she is born, Marie is “an unlikely priestess—unversed in her religion but nonetheless its guide” (Rhodes 205). Despite her apparent success, Marie struggles for gender-based power and autonomy.

In her newly acquired role as Christio-Conjure priestess, she indignantly notes that John wields more power than she. Though she, as a woman, possesses more visionary power, John is more adept at manipulating the patrons. Even her followers turn to him for guidance. Marie is incensed by the sexism that threatens her role as a Christio-Conjure visionary. Weak and disconnected, her lack of spiritual grounding enables John to transform her into a charlatan. Irresolute in her personal religious convictions, she feels powerless against John who insists upon sacrilegious performances. On her deathbed, Marie confesses to Louis: “*Voodoo and Catholicism merged, and my fame spread. I blasphemed two faiths*” (258 original emphasis). Here, Marie reflects upon an earlier period in her life when, prior to her Christio-Conjure conversion, she practices spiritual extortion by religiously manipulating her followers. At this point in her emotional development, instead of relying upon faith in herself and her personal sense of spirituality, Marie is still dependent upon John as the source of her self-definition.

While battling psychological and physical victimization inflicted by John, Marie also contends with her half-brother, Antoine DeLavie’s attempt to rape her. As a black woman accusing a white man of rape in this era, Marie has utterly no legal recourse; consequently, she takes matters into her own hands and kills Antoine in self-defense.

Committing this act initially endows Marie with a sense of power and then a sense of sorrow as she is convinced “no one, anywhere, knew anything about faith” (252). She further confides in her house servant that, famous for murder, she is now more revered than ever. She knows the judge is afraid to convict her of Antoine’s murder because John has threatened “hideous revenge” (273). Within the context of her new-found power to intimidate, Marie is disgusted by the grotesque exaggerations of her wrath, which she believes will live on even after her death. Furthermore, she is repulsed by the circumstances that allow her to amass a spiritual following and political power based upon acts of brutality that inspire fear.

John’s use of fear and intimidation against the political establishment speaks to the historical role of the Conjurer as the “po’ man’s lawyah” (Chireau 173). Zora Neale Hurston, for example, describes a Conjurer in Louisiana whose specialty was the law. This practitioner prepared charms and rituals for clients in order “to keep the court under his control” (*Mules and Men*, Houston 231). Clearly, the ability to tap into this political realm was an extremely useful resource, “a sort of spiritual capital” (Chireau 134) in the hands of black practitioners who often appropriated their conjuring in politically subversive ways. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie is dismayed by the immense social inequity inherent in the nineteenth-century American legal system, and she responds with vigilantism. Publicly, her murderous act is seen as more than simple self-defense, it is interpreted as a cry for social justice and reform. Her retaliation against Antoine elevates her Christio-Conjure status throughout the community, but paradoxically it does very little to help her personal mission to reconstruct her identity.

While Marie searches for spiritual fulfillment in order to conquer psychological isolation, she remains under the sexual domination of John who impregnates her. During her pregnancy, by drawing connections between past and future generations, she begins to develop a sense of her lineage. Carrying the fifth generation of Maries, the protagonist recognizes the symbolic power of woman as the giver of life. She perceives childbirth as an empowering process that privileges female biological capability over male capability in human reproduction and notes that women birth themselves woman to woman, a chain as old as creation, back “to Eve [. . .] a never-ending circle” (145-6). The theme of Christio-Conjure resurfaces in the text as Marie contextualizes her sense of connection within Christian and Conjure traditions, referencing both Eve and Damballah. Further engendering Marie’s newly developing sense of connection, Grandmère suggests from her deathbed that Marie’s labor represents a unified effort among the generations of Laveau women. In order for baby Marie to thrive under the auspices of four generations of Voodooines, the protagonist must ground herself spiritually and pass the Christio-Conjure “mantle of power” (212) on to baby Marie.

Through the spirit of Damballah, Marie recognizes the full potential of her spiritual power. Like Hurston’s account of the historical Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau descending to the bottom of Lake Ponchatrain and not returning for nine days, Rhodes’ fictional protagonist achieves a similar feat. As she meditates beneath the lake, Marie, possessed by Damballah, is transformed and experiences joy and elation for the first time in her adult life. Damballah not only soothes her feelings of motherlessness by offering her a powerful sense of history/identity as a spiritual priestess within a line of others, but the serpent god also erases her sense of hopelessness, making her believe “even the stars

above were within her grasp” (310). Throughout the text the symbol of the snake represents a metaphor for Marie’s burgeoning sense of self and spiritual rebirth. Her faithful supporters bolster her confidence, including Nattie who encourages her to eschew John. She reminds Marie of her spiritual legacy and emphasizes Marie’s ability to overcome John’s domination. Marie’s confidence grows, and while John performs trickery, Marie transforms reality for herself and masses of others who face psychological oppression. Similar to Cypress’s dance performances in *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, Marie performs ritualistic Christio-Conjure acts for her followers, and her performances become cathartic for her and her audiences.

As Marie cultivates her faith in Christio-Conjure, she develops the self-confidence to challenge John’s tyrannical rule. Possessed by the spirit of Damballah, Marie wiggles “*down from*” (156 original emphasis) John’s arms; this represents another pivotal moment in their relationship. Like Sassafrass, who is healed during divine possession and inspired to sever her abusive relationship with Mitch, Marie is spiritually restored through this act. Newly empowered, she develops the will to retaliate against John. His incestuous interaction with baby Marie is the ultimate factor that motivates Marie to fully engage in the “fight” (323) for psychological emancipation and physical liberation from John. On St. John’s Eve, during her most popular and well-attended ceremony, she allows/causes her python to strangle him. John’s murder is framed within the context of his incessant abuse. “John, alive” she believes, “would have destroyed their daughter—the [fifth] Marie—as surely as he’d destroyed all the others” (422). Like Marie’s first victim, Antoine, John too is depicted as a man who “deserved to die” (254).

Ironically, the brutal acts that end in death for Antoine and John function as metaphors for Marie's self-preservation.

Thoroughly liberated and with a fresh, unsullied sense of her history and identity, she speaks to the spirit of her great-grandmother, Membe, and confesses her murderous acts. Instead of harshly judging and/or criticizing Marie, Membe consoles her by reflecting upon the harshness of life. Membe defines the role of a Voodooeine as one who helps herself and others "*to live as much goodness as possible*" (426 original emphasis). Like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, Marie too is born with a caul and is therefore blessed with the privilege of "second sight" (400). Not only does she benefit personally from second sight, but she also employs this psychic gift to help her patrons uncover the mysteries shrouding their own existence. Furthermore, the caul serves as a point of connection between Marie and her newborn namesake, also born with a caul. The caul is a semiotic link between Marie and five generations of Laveau women who "hand down sight through the generations. Mother to daughter" (12).

Finally free from John's vile influence, Marie purges the main source of spiritual poison from her life. Following her divine possession, she is fully converted into Christio-Conjure, and her faith crystallizes into a pure form. Shedding the role of charlatan, she becomes remarkably sincere in her ministry. She consoles not only the dying but also those imprisoned who turn to her in their desperate search for salvation. She says a rosary, "Hail Mary, full of grace" (263) for those who ask and also shares how it feels to be possessed by the spirit of Damballah. Most significantly, she recites her own prayers to Damballah and the holy Virgin, demonstrating her personal belief in and practice of Christio-Conjure. In her spiritual role as community servant, while

imprisoned, Marie comforts a fellow inmate with the “Flying African”¹¹ folk myth. The “Flying African” motif is further enacted during Marie’s burial service. When she dies, the blended aspects of her burial ceremony poignantly speak to the fused tradition of Christio-Conjure, which exemplify not only her religious philosophy but also her spiritual legacy.

Louis describes her burial service as “*a spectacular blend of Catholic ritual and Voodoo drums and dancing*” (433 original emphasis). Following her death, a woman reports Marie walking east across the Gulf toward Africa. Marie’s spirit is deified as she is characterized as one of the legendary “flying Africans.” In four of the five novels featured in my discussion, a variation of this myth exists. In *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, the spirit of Blue Sunday is reported to have flown east across the Atlantic toward Africa; in *Baby of the Family*, the story of the spirit of Rachel functions as a modification of this myth; in *Mama Day*, the spirit of Sapphira Wade is said to have flown east across the Atlantic; and finally in *Voodoo Dreams*, the spirit of Marie Laveau is rumored to have taken the same course. The folk figure of the flying African, fleeing the degradation of American slavery, is a powerfully triumphant image of black resistance and rebellion. During her lifetime, despite tremendous pain and suffering, the protagonist in *Voodoo Dreams* transforms into a true Christio-Conjure priestess. She employs her faith as a vehicle of psychological liberation and aids the masses of oppressed by offering them an image of defiance against the white, male-dominated social structure.

Christio-Conjure as a Spiritual Mechanism of Liberation and Connection

Like the historical Marie Laveau, the protagonist in *Voodoo Dreams* is responsible for fusing the two dominant religions in nineteenth-century New Orleans. In

the novel, Marie knows no other Voodooienne who “placed the Christian God beside the snake;” she is convinced that “Voodoo could be a ‘mixed blood’ stew transformed” as “the slave trade transformed Africans in color and language” (297). As a result of Marie’s widespread influence, faith in Christio-Conjure spreads throughout New Orleans and the surrounding areas, broadening Marie’s core following and attracting a demographically diverse patronage. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Christio-Conjure addresses the spiritual needs of members of the privileged and oppressed classes, and the composition of her congregation blurs both racial and class lines, as the white elite and the black underclass both subscribe to Christio-Conjure.

Marie’s individual spiritual evolution represents a bridge between individual and communal concerns. Although Marie’s quest for identity is the device that motivates the plot of the novel, her individual transformation ultimately functions as a trans-generational, communal healing for others too, both living and deceased. The connection between the past and present severed by slavery is mended and reconnected through Christio-Conjure. During a private ceremony, Marie places the images of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus next to drawings of Erzulie and Damballah. She communicates with her immediate ancestors, lighting a candle for each generation of Maries. Marie’s vision of herself is illuminated as she finally recognizes the critical role Christio-Conjure serves in connecting her spiritually with her loved ones.

Woman’s power is reiterated throughout this work, and as an afrocentric text, the black women in this novel possess the vision and the wisdom that accompanies the power to see. However, despite being born with a caul and inheriting the “gift of sight,” the gifted in Christio-Conjure narratives often undergo a painful process of evolution in

order to fully master their spiritual potential and perform as visionaries. The effect of the evolutionary process is both individual and communal, since the visionaries ultimately serve the greater community with their spiritual gifts. In addition to the gift of vision, the act of divine possession also functions within individual and communal contexts. Possessed by Damballah who only enters priestesses, Marie glimpses human existence in its infancy, millions of years ago. She is filled with a sense of harmony as she witnesses the cycle of life in its earliest days. In this mentally transported state, Marie achieves the wholeness and sense of connection she has long sought.

Not only is Marie healed, but she also heals others through the act of divine possession. Like Sassafrass in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Marie's divine possession serves as a vital link with her ancestral past. It also offers her a sense of identity within a lineage of other female healers, which enables her to fulfill her role as Christio-Conjure spiritual priestess. In the novel, not only does Marie contend with various forms of oppression inherent in Western culture including racism and sexism, but she also contends with physical, sexual, and psychological abuse from John and with internal, personal inadequacies. For Marie, Christio-Conjure constitutes a triple mechanism of liberation and connection. It enables her to combat racist and economic oppression imposed by the dominant culture, it liberates her from John's psychological reign of terror, and it re-connects her with a compelling spiritual/familial legacy.

The Laveau women represent five consecutive generations of Christio-Conjure priestesses, indicating the longevity of Christio-Conjure as a sustained tradition in black America. The image of the five generations of priestesses bears additional significance since the historical legend of the immortal Marie Laveau was perpetuated by the real-life

generations of Laveau women in New Orleans. Through the act of spirit possession the generations of textual Laveau women literally exist as one. This sense of connection is conveyed in the words of Grandmère as she addresses a pregnant Marie: “*blood ties bind* [. . .]. We’re all inside you [. . .]. We live forever” (329 added emphasis). Thus, baby Marie’s birth signifies the extension of the fifth generation of Maries as well as the preservation of the myth of Marie Laveau as immortal. As well, it promotes the uninterrupted continuation of the Christio-Conjure legacy.

As a literary Christio-Conjure woman, Rhodes reinscribes the subversive power of the black female, a figure historically marginalized. Featuring the resounding principle that “*blood ties bind*” (329), this text—of all those discussed—most obviously illustrates “the blending of religions and blood” (135) that is the quintessential quality of Christio-Conjure. Within the tradition of historical fiction, Kubitschek contends that “the African-American woman’s novel consistently asserts the necessity of recognizing [. . .] both intellectually and emotionally [. . .] the history of blacks in order to become and remain a fully-functional African American woman” (5). From this perspective, it is Rhodes’ responsibility to her audience to reconstruct a socially and politically accurate portrait of the Laveau era, replete with the racist, sexist, economic and religious issues prevalent at that time. While the historical Marie Laveau made history, *Voodoo Dreams* revises history by presenting the poignant image of a vulnerable Marie, an image unavailable through history. The novel not only illustrates Marie’s spiritual transformation, but it also portrays the transformative power of Christio-Conjure as an historical agent of black women’s liberation and empowerment.

CHAPTER 3: CHRISTIO-CONJURE AND THE GHOST STORY

Overview: The Spirit of Rachel as Cultural Foremother

Like Marie in *Voodoo Dreams*, for Lena, Ansa's protagonist in *Baby of the Family*, spirit contact is her most transformative Christio-Conjure experience. Though she experiences various forms of spirit contact throughout the novel, one of her most significant encounters occurs when she is seven-years old, foreshadowing the life-altering exchange she eventually has with the spirit of her grandmother. During summer vacation, while she and her family visit the Georgia coast, Lena meets Rachel, the spirit of a slave woman. As they sit on the shore, Rachel shares a disconcerting story, which becomes a valuable lesson. Rachel recounts the brutalities of slavery and explains how she *took* her freedom by drowning herself in the ocean. Lena is baffled by Rachel's story because her grandmother, Miss Lizzie, relentlessly insists that "colored folks don't belong on the beach" (167). While Miss Lizzie's comments mirror the racist sentiments of the mid-twentieth century that prohibited African Americans from enjoying the beaches reserved for whites only, Rachel offers an alternative perspective on the relationship between place/space and self-empowerment; she explains:

[t]here was something about the ocean that just kept drawing me chere [. . .]. It sung songs of what I coulda been if I warn't no slave [. . .] to be a slave on the ocean, I could not bear it [. . .]. I was glad to be going. I was going to the ocean and couldn't nobody ever stop me from going there again [. . .]. I'm always here [. . .]. This is where I wanted to be, this is where I choose to be, and this is where I is [. . .]. Black folk belong here. You belong here. Don't believe black folks don't belong on the beach, Lena. Don't never forget that. You belong anywhere on this earth you want to. (157-168)

Rachel's spirit functions as a storyteller and symbolic griot.¹ As well, Rachel's narrative, like Marie's in *Voodoo Dreams*, embodies the Ibo myth of captured West Africans who,

upon arriving in the “New World,” envision the horror and misery of American slavery and subsequently turn and walk back across the Atlantic Ocean to their native land in West Africa. In African American folklore, myriad variations of this liberation tale exist, including enslaved Africans flying or swimming across the Atlantic to freedom in Africa.

In *Baby of the Family*, the spirit of Rachel, like Miss Lizzie and Nurse Bloom, represents a critical link with the past. In African American women’s history and in Christio-Conjure, maintaining a sense of connection by linking the past to the present is crucial since both are dependent upon oral transmission. Abena P. Busia explains that through writing and oral storytelling, African American women reclaim “their stories” as “part of a larger project of self-revalidation” (196). The oral tradition, as represented in Rachel’s narrative, is also significant within the context of Christio-Conjure. With no single holy text, the Christio-Conjure spiritual paradigm, like Rachel’s narrative, is primarily conveyed through oral transmission.

Rachel’s storytelling reflects the element of Christio-Conjure represented by the power of the spoken word. She insists that Lena cognitively absorb the tale of her suffering and ultimate liberation. Through her interaction with the spirit of Rachel, Lena gleans a portion of her cultural past. From the message transmitted by her cultural foremother, she is offered an alternate ideology that rejects the dominant culture’s racism. Rachel contends that Lena, and the entire African American collective, is free to exist wherever they choose, on the seashore or elsewhere. As a narrative of resistance against cultural domination, Rachel’s story functions in the same manner that Christio-Conjure functions in black women’s writing. In black women’s literature, Christio-Conjure serves as a subversive

device employed by the black female subject in her struggle against religious, racial, patriarchal oppression and sexual exploitation which frames her American experience.

(Un)Veiling the Ritual of “Caul & Response”

With declarations like “Voodoo and Catholicism merged” (258) resonating throughout *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes explicitly depicts the blended construct of Christio-Conjure in her novel. But Ansa’s *Baby of the Family* contains no grand declarations of spiritual merging. In Ansa’s novel, Christio-Conjure is (un)veiled far more subtly, focusing, as it were, on the subject of the veil or “caul” with which Lena, the protagonist, is born. In an interview, Ansa provides a cultural framework for the concept, explaining that the veil has supernatural significance; it is a “thin membrane, or piece of skin, that some babies are born with over their faces, some over their heads, or their whole bodies” (qtd. in Carroll 20). For “African American, Native American, Welsh, Caribbean, South American” people, this veil “means that the child is special in some way, or connected with the supernatural” (20). Moreover, babies born with a veil are not only special themselves but are thought to possess “special power” (120-21). The culturally inscribed value of the caul in black America is linked to traditional West African beliefs, for ex-slaves often identified African born slaves in late antebellum times “as natural conjurers;” blacks believed that those born with a caul had secret power and that “it was somehow a gift of their African heritage” (218). In addition, self-identified Conjurers claimed “to have been born with a caul, or a double caul. Ritually preserved for later magical use, the single caul enabled one to see spirits, a double caul to converse with them” (Brown 8).

Set in 1949, in the fictitious town of Mulberry, Georgia² the character of Nurse Bloom functions as a cultural icon and is the one who preserves Lena’s caul. In *Baby of the Family*, “the figure of the [black lay] midwife/woman healer provides a pivotal

structural and thematic framework” (Lee 20). With the exception of Nellie, who opposes Christio-Conjure because she doesn’t realize “[t]here’s wisdom outside of our day-to-day reality” (Jordan 22), the stories of the other characters serve as liberation narratives. Rachel is liberated from literal, legal bondage; Nurse Bloom is liberated from the sexist and racist strictures of modern science; Miss Lizzie is liberated from cultural and spiritual ignorance; and Lena is liberated from a haunted existence. Each plays a unique role in Lena’s rite of passage and Christio-Conjure conversion.

Lena’s caul serves as a point of departure and return for action and dialogue in the text, generating a *back and forth* textual negotiation. Geneva Smitherman discusses this *back and forth* negotiation as an African diasporic cultural construct known as *call-response*. She contends that this “African-derived communication process” prevalent in the black church is characterized by “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener”³ (*Talkin and Testifyin* 104). The call-response performance impinges upon virtually every aspect of African American culture including speech, religion, music, and literature. Within the African American literary canon, call-response shapes the concept of talking texts wherein “black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts” thematically (*Signifying*, Gates xxvi).

Baby of the Family dialogues with other black women’s texts featuring the Christio-Conjure topos. More specifically, *Baby of the Family* presents the trope of “caul and response” as the mystery of Lena’s birth is (un)veiled in the text through the discourse of Christio-Conjure. The novel depicts Christio-Conjure through the simultaneous presentation of belief in the Christian God,⁴ accepting “callings” from the

Christian God, calling upon the Christian God/Jesus Christ in moments of crisis, paying homage to the Christian God via the ritual of prayer, combined with ancestor reverence, faith in the power of the veil, spirit possession, interpreting signs from nature to predict future events, and conversing with spirits.

In the novel, Nurse Bloom symbolizes a cultural reservoir of medical folk wisdom, and as she preserves Lena's birth caul, she demonstrates her medical expertise. In the country Nurse Bloom was an unlicensed lay midwife who learned the craft through "self-instruction and apprenticeship" (Reid 219-20). In *Baby of the Family*, the theme of divine "calling" is linked to the image of the midwife, for historically black lay midwives⁵ believed their roles as community servants were predicated not upon personal career decisions but upon a calling from God. As such, the role of the midwife in the African American community parallels the role of the preacher; Smitherman contends that

[m]uch of what is accomplished by call-response can be witnessed by moving through the hierarchy of the traditional black church [. . .]. God must send the man who is to lead [. . .] it is the beginning of the process, that is, the *call* by God and the man's *response* by taking up the ministry [. . .] you don't go to [. . .] school to be [a] preacher [. . .] God must "call" you. (*Talkin and Testifyin* 109-110)

Despite the Christian ministry's fundamental exclusion of women, African American women who occupied the black, woman-governed arena of midwifery,⁶ nonetheless envisioned themselves as spiritual conduits of the Lord and created an autonomous space for themselves within the male-dominated sphere of Christianity. Like black preachers, they too believed God called upon them as community servants. In the black community, midwife conjuring (treatment and healing with a natural pharmacopoeia of herbs, barks,

and roots and such) was, itself, regarded as divinely ordained. Herron and Bacon note that an “old woman who was a conjure doctor [said] she had a special revelation from God, as do all conjure doctors” (360). Highlighting the quintessential nature of the midwife’s dual role in the African American community, Lee describes the traditional black lay midwife as “God’s servant and woman’s agent” (1); thus, her role is at once spiritual and political.

During slavery, the black lay midwife maintained a position of respect, reverence, and medical authority on American plantations while the masses of enslaved blacks were routinely brutalized and demeaned:

[w]hen slave ships brought black women to America, these women came with attitudes about health care that were African-based rather than European.⁷ They came with a knowledge of midwifery and botanic roots [. . .]. In eras when many older slaves were expendable commodities, elderly black midwives were thought of as assets in their slave communities. They were fertility specialists, moral counselors and root workers [. . .]. There is much evidence that black midwives were central to the structure of a slave economy wherein black women were breeders. (Bogdan 115)

In many ways, Nurse Bloom fits the traditional mold of the black lay midwife. Her medical repository is African-based, she possesses a keen knowledge of midwifery, and she is also a counselor and root worker. But like traditional black lay midwives who were so well anchored in southern American culture, in the novel Nurse Bloom, too, loses her “high cultural status”⁸ (Lee 24). With the rise of the medicalization process in the United States during the 1800s, white males took an avid interest in the matter of childbirth. After existing for centuries as a woman-dominated socio-medical sphere, a merciless campaign to discredit midwives. The dominant culture usurped the midwives’

medical authority and degraded their expertise, in Foucault's terms, as "subjugated knowledge," i.e., knowledge "disqualified as inadequate to [the] task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (*Power/Knowledge* 82). But despite professional displacement, the cultural eminence of the black lay midwife was too deeply embedded in the African American collective psyche to fade from cultural prominence.

Honoring the black lay midwife, "African American history calls and African American literature responds" (Lee 18). The black lay midwife re-emerges within the Christio-Conjure genre of contemporary black women's writing, and her literary image functions as a dissonant, subversive counter-force to racio-gendered systems of oppression in American culture. Because the practice of midwifery is established by a divine mandate from the Christian God and is based upon a medical tradition of West African healing, the literary black lay midwife functions as an archetypal Christio-Conjure character in various novels by black women. Specifically in *Baby of the Family*, the midwife, epitomized by Nurse Bloom, serves as a metaphorical lifeline for Lena. Lena is the point of intersection through which all the women in the novel (Nurse Bloom, Nellie, Rachel, and Miss Lizzie) "re-claim and pass on their cultural heritage" (Jordan 1).

Nurse Bloom

In black women's texts, midwives are accorded cultural prestige,⁹ and they transform the narratives of a significant number of black women writers. Despite efforts to destroy them, "the literary [black lay midwife] is a character with an eclectic profession and [. . .] presence" (Lee 8-9). Representing this tradition, prior to working as a nurse in the local hospital, Nurse Bloom, is called "Mother Bloom" as "a midwife in the

country” (Ansa 17 and 19). As a black nurse in 1949, Nurse Bloom functions within the cultural matrix of black lay midwives historically displaced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Respected throughout the community, “[e]verybody knows how much everyone looks up to [her]” (Ansa 28). Within a lineage of women who serve as spiritual conduits of the Christian Lord and as practitioners of West African-influenced customs of healthcare, Nurse Bloom is an archetypal Christio-Conjure character. Possessing the title Mother, she functions as the symbolic community matriarch¹⁰ and is responsible for the medical and spiritual well-being of the black collective. As Mother “Bloom,” her name is associated with organic richness and natural abundance; she participates in a metaphorical fertility ritual when she wonders what Lena’s newborn “bath water can do for Mrs. Williams’ poor little roses [. . .] she sprinkle[s] the base of the plants with the pinkish water,” and she won’t “be surprised if those things are flourishing next spring” (20). Her role in the novel is to nurture both people and things and to help them flourish, especially Lena, the special newborn.

In the delivery room on the day of Lena’s birth everyone, including Nurse Bloom and Dr. Williams, is fascinated by the newborn who “arriving with a veil over her face [. . .] brought with her a touch of the supernatural to a place that owed so much to the scientific” (3). Throughout the opening scene there is a distinct dichotomy between the Western scientific *space* of the hospital delivery room, governed by Dr. Williams, and the ritualistic Christio-Conjure *activity* performed in that space by Nurse Bloom. Lee explains the dissonance between midwives and medical doctors:

[h]istorically, conjuring has been a pejorative label used to explain the inexplicable power of the Other, most notably the racial other who was thought to be steeped in African superstitions [. . .] the magic and power of black women

who mix concoctions for childbirth and general healing will always be reduced to a narrow, outsider's definition of conjuring [. . .]. Despite the fact that most [midwives], as Christians, eschewed any alliances with the devil, many doctors nevertheless reductively labeled their activities as witchcraft. (12-13)

In *Baby of the Family*, however, Dr. Williams symbolically erases the historical tension between midwives and doctors by discarding his privileged position in the hospital as a medical expert. Following Lena's delivery, he "gave no thought to the techniques he had learned at Meharry,"¹¹ and "he turned the next two minutes into a ritualized dance that had nothing to do with modern medicine" (Ansa 5). Dr. Williams relinquishes his Western, professional medical demeanor and surrenders to West African cultural influence, signified by his "ritualized dance." Likewise, "he cannot shake off the mythology and the rituals that are a part of such a birth. Folk culture erupts" (Lee 122).

As "the nurse [Dr. Williams] most trusts" (Ansa 122) and as the one who is the "[m]ost delighted" (122) with Lena's birth, Nurse Bloom supplies Lena the necessary medical attention required at birth. The injustices suffered by historical black lay midwives are inverted as Nurse Bloom transforms the hospital into a Christio-Conjure space: she "once again [becomes] Mother Bloom, enacting the necessary rituals" (122) to properly preserve Lena's caul. As Nurse Bloom surreptitiously "gives Lena's caul the right attention" (30), she assumes the role of ritual specialist. Like historical black lay midwives who were forced to resituate their crafts(wo)manship within the context of Western medical protocol by sitting for medical exams and becoming licensed by state medical boards, Nurse Bloom, too, demonstrates the same level of dexterity and adaptability, adjusting "her ritual to fit the modern mode" (17). Undaunted by the Westernized space of the urban hospital, Nurse Bloom performs the identical rituals in

the hospital that she conducted as Mother Bloom in the country: “acting as if the gods were watching her every move” she “pulled the caul from the baby’s face” and beneath her mask “her wrinkled lips moved to a chant she spoke in her head” (5). Additionally, she

dropped the drying membrane into the still-warm bloody water in the [. . .] metal pan [. . .] swiftly cut a piece [. . .] rolled the stiff section of skin up, and dropped it in the teapot. Then she [. . .] poured a stream of hot water into the teapot [. . .] took a glass baby bottle [. . .] and poured the warm caul tea into it [. . .]. I’ll let her mother give it to her. That’s the way it should be. (18-23)

As Nurse Bloom steeps Lena’s caul in boiling water, preparing the tea, this passage of the text is steeped in the *caul*-and-response thematic. The physical manifestation of the caul at Lena’s birth serves as the metaphorical *call* for Nurse Bloom to enact her time-honored Christio-Conjure preservation rituals; the textual *response* entails her actual performance of the rituals.

The specific nature of Nurse Bloom’s activities are blurred within the text, for they are at once medical/scientific as well as spiritual/ritualistic. She reveals that the caul is more than a piece of skin and describes it as a sign indicating that Lena has unique powers. Nurse Bloom believes Lena will be “very wise in ways we don’t always appreciate [. . .] she has got a link to that other world that most [. . .] pretend don’t exist” (27-28). Nurse Bloom conveys to Nellie, Lena’s mother, the relevance of this Christio-Conjure cultural belief and explains that for Lena to be properly indoctrinated into Christio-Conjure culture, a series of caul rituals must be performed. Because the caul can serve as either a blessing or a curse, its preservation and the preparation of the caul tea ensure its blessing status. As a blessing, the caul functions as a metaphysical asset

empowering Lena to commune in positive, productive, life-affirming ways with spirits of the deceased. Conversely, without appropriate ritualistic attention, the caul produces menacing effects such as unwanted interaction with random, malcontent spirits. Nurse Bloom advises Nellie:

this isn't superstitions [. . .] I'm talking about what really is [. . .]. There's all kinds of things in this world that people call superstitions because they don't understand them or because they don't neatly fit into their way of thinking nowadays, but that doesn't mean that these things are some crazy mumbo-jumbo of ignorant country people [. . .] you must keep this caul for your child until she is grown [. . .]. If it's lost or misplaced, it will make the child forgetful.
(27-31)

With this advice, Nurse Bloom warns of the undesirable repercussions Lena may suffer if Nellie does not adhere to the ritualistic procedures. But the exchange with Nellie proceeds nothing “like the nurse had thought it would” (27). Nellie’s disinterest signals her dismissal of Nurse Bloom’s advice, which she view as subjugated knowledge. Nurse Bloom is dismayed by Nellie’s apparent inability to relate to the instructions she provides and attributes this to Nellie’s lack of “commonsense” (31).

In the African American community, common sense is often referred to as “mother wit” which, according to Dundes, is “the collective wisdom acquired by the experience of living” (xiv). Furthermore, mother wit represents “intuition [and] wisdom not taught in school or found in books” (*Black Talk*, Smitherman 163). Nurse Bloom posits, “I *am* country” but “I sho’ ain’t ignorant. I brought more babies into this world as a midwife than you can shake a stick at, and I learned a thing or two in the process” (Ansa 28 original emphasis). The proverbial “thing or two” Nurse Blooms learns over the course of her life and career as a midwife constitute her acquisition of mother wit, a

type of knowledge traditionally associated with black lay midwifery. Although it is viewed as subjugated knowledge by the dominant culture (exemplified by Nellie), the novel privileges it as an afrocentric construct. Nurse Bloom, not Nellie, possesses the wisdom to remedy Lena's disturbing experiences. In the African American community, mother wit serves as a repository of critical, life-sustaining knowledge and functions as a tool of empowerment fashioned in the hands of black women, specifically black lay midwives.

Nellie

Nellie cannot appreciate Nurse Bloom's wisdom and ignores her advice about Lena's caul. Though they outwardly function as ideological opposites, below the surface, Nellie, like Nurse Bloom, also functions as a Christio-Conjure character. As a member of the black middle-class, Nellie espouses middle-class sensibilities that serve as counter-intelligence to the storehouse of mother wit dispensed by Nurse Bloom. Several characteristics reveal the level of social status Nellie has attained. She is a homemaker, her husband is an entrepreneur, her children attend private school, and her home is adorned with fine furnishings. Often in the black middle-class, "any peculiar beliefs or habits among blacks [. . .] tended to be looked down upon as all bad, and to be forgotten as quickly as possible" (Chireau 233). Nellie's objective, then, is to abandon "all those old-timey ideas" (Ansa 27) and "old-fashioned foolishness" (32). In order to achieve this, she attempts to disassociate herself from any vestige of black folk culture, including the cultural icon of the black lay midwife.

As a "modern new mother" (34), Nellie dismisses Nurse Bloom's admonition; she burns Lena's caul and throws out the protective tea. On one hand, Nellie regards Nurse

Bloom as “a sweet woman, going to all this trouble [her] my baby,” but on the other hand, she berates her as “a grown intelligent woman” who believes in ghosts (33). Lee addresses Nellie and Nurse Bloom’s ideological conflict in terms of the “campaign to discredit” black lay midwives:

black women tried to distance themselves from [. . .] [black lay midwives] [. . .]. To go to the doctor or hospital became a test of modernity for many black maternity patients [. . .] to prove their new world sophistication [. . .]. The patients were being pulled in various directions. Should they elect the aid of the women who serviced their mothers and grandmothers? Or should they upon recognizing that there have been advances in the field of obstetrics, go to a hospital? (46)

Unlike the women described above, Nellie does not seem conflicted about choosing between old world West African principles and new world Western thought. As a member of the black bourgeoisie, her dismissal of Nurse Bloom’s advice clearly marks her loyalty to the ideals of the dominant culture:

African American folk practices were subjected to an extensive process of redefinition that resulted in their devaluation [. . .]. [F]ollowing the Civil War missionaries and clergy attempted to alter the morals of black freedpersons by their disavowal of customs and practices which were associated with slavery. In the 1870s black colleges endeavored to “uplift” the ex-slaves and their children, censuring traditions [. . .] they believed reflected uncivilized or uncultivated behavior. Finally within the popular sphere folk beliefs and occult practices [. . .] were consigned to the domain of superstition [. . .]. [P]ractices like Conjure were downgraded and eventually distanced from their religious roots. (Chireau 239)

Representing this quality of patronizing disdain, Nellie dismisses various forms of black folk culture, including spiritual beliefs, as ignorant and superstitious.

Like other aspects of her life, the manner in which Nellie and her family worship denotes their assimilation into the mainstream, dominant culture. Instead of subscribing to the Christio-Conjure form of religious worship widespread in the southern black church, Nellie is a staunch Catholic. The influence of traditional Catholicism in the McPherson home is clear and apparent. According to the narrator, the family at the dinner table reminds Lena of the “priest, altar boys, and communicants at Mass,” even “the fabric her mother had chosen to cover the chairs [. . .] alternating stripes of maroon satin and beige satin separated by ridges of gold—reminded Lena of the priest’s vestments of gold, purple, green, red, and white” (Ansa 102). Also, before each meal, everyone made the sign of the cross and said “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. [. . .] Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen” (106). This scene suggests the McPherson’s brand of worship is extremely *whitewashed*, in particular, the diction of the prayer they recite as they “bless” their meal echoes a highly formalized version of standard American speech in contrast to their day-to-day Black English. Nellie’s commitment to Catholicism reflects Leroi Jones’s characterization of “house Negroes” (33) who sought to replicate as many facets of white culture as possible, including their form of Christian worship. Nellie’s character functions as a metaphor for both “house Negroes” as well as American mainstream culture at large, which has historically demeaned and discounted Christio-Conjure and its practitioners.

As Nellie assimilates into American mainstream culture, Lena’s Christio-Conjure-influenced actions and experiences leave “no room for Nellie to respond in a sensible way;” she considers taking Lena by the hospital to see if Nurse Bloom can “tell her

something about the girl's strange ways," but "she dismis[s]e[s] the idea" (Ansa 60). Despite Nellie's attempts to ignore the influence of Christio-Conjure upon her family life, she remains bewildered, perplexed, and astounded by Lena's behavior. Further demonstrating her confusion, Nellie at once rejects and considers Nurse Bloom's assessment of Lena as a "special" child. Nellie wonders, "who does she think she is, saying that about Lena as if my baby was some kind of crazy voodoo woman?" (255). But "at the same time Nellie couldn't shake the eerie feeling that somehow the nurse really knew what she was talking about" (255). As the most avid challenger of Christio-Conjure in the text, Nellie finds it impossible to utterly discount the tangible ways the spiritual construct influences her family life. Despite her effort to maintain a strictly anti-Conjure position, she routinely acknowledges Christio-Conjure in her daily activities. Lena's ability to "put the magic" on things, for example, is an activity her family finds awe-inspiring:

her family took it seriously. If a stranger was present [. . .] someone in the family would explain casually, "You know Lena was born with a veil over her face." If the car didn't start after two or three tries, everyone in the car would turn to Lena. "Come on baby," her mother would say, "put the magic on this car for us so I can get the boys to school in this rain" [. . .]. She could put the magic on just about anything: a radio, the television, a stuck door, a rusty ice cream churn. Her magic [. . .] nearly always worked for a time. (52)

Nellie's devotion to Catholicism coupled with her simultaneous reverence of Lena's Conjure-based, metaphysical abilities marks her as an unwitting Christio-Conjure character, though she consciously rejects the paradigm. Christio-Conjure is presented as a compelling force in the novel with the power to sway the thoughts of even a

nonbeliever. This central theme parallels the faith's historical tenaciousness and illustrates the essence of its enduring character, despite incessant attempts to discredit it.

Lena

From her first moment of life, Lena casts a “spell” (3) upon the delivery room, born with a caul “[o]ver her entire head, as if draped there by a band of angels” (3). She is a child whom God touched “in the womb” (17). Following her birth, the hospital staff discusses the significance of her birth caul. She is supposed to be lucky, have special powers, and “be able to tell you things. But the biggest power is [her ability] to see ghosts [. . .]. The caul is a gift from God” (16). Noteworthy in these passages is the amalgamation of Conjure subject matter (e.g., reading the future and seeing ghosts) and Christian subject matter (e.g., a child chosen and expressly blessed by God).

Although Lena is lucidly characterized as a Christio-Conjure character from birth, it is nonetheless impossible for her to *believe in* and *practice* the spiritual construct genuinely, because she doesn't understand it. As devout Catholics, Lena's parents enroll her in a private Catholic school; thus, at home, church, and school she is inundated with solely Christian ideals. Though she participates in various aspects of Christio-Conjure, not only is she confounded by her experiences, but worse, with the exception of “putting the magic” on random objects, she finds her Christio-Conjure experiences intensely frightening. Her family “talked of her being born with a veil over her face and of seeing ghosts over her shoulder and of putting the magic on things, but they did not really believe in half the stuff they talked about” (87). Although they occasionally tease her about her uncommon abilities, often her family members are unaware of her supernatural experiences.

The first time Lena tells her family she has seen a ghost, she suffers convulsions and, recalling the “the sickness, the vomiting, the fits that had struck her when she told her family about the ghost” (41), she learns to keep her ghostly visions a secret. This experience creates in Lena a sense of terror, and rather than a visit from a “helpful” (29) spirit, her experience seems more like a visit from a demon. The inclination to demonize unfamiliar religious practices/beliefs is a more insidious problem than Nellie’s characterization of Christio-Conjure as superstitious yet innocent—i.e., ignorant yet harmless. Citing the Puritan settlers’ early encounters with indigenous Americans, historian, Ronald Takaki, documents Christian demonization of Native American religion. He notes the Puritan’s urge to reduce the religious practices of indigenous Americans to devil worship and the characterization of Indian religious beliefs as “diabolical” as if “framed and devised by the devil himself” (40). Takaki discusses Reverend Thomas Mayhew who in 1652 wrote that the Wampanoags of Martha’s Vineyard were “zealous and earnest in the Worship of False gods and Devils [. . .] [and were under the influence of a multitude of Heathen Traditions [. . .] and abounding with sins” (40). As well, in his article, “Conjure/Doctors: A Black Discourse,” David Brown explains that “[c]onjure and conjurers” were “regarded as evil instruments of the Devil by white society” (10). Moreover, he discusses Minister C.C. Jones who viewed Conjure as an “irresistible Satanic influence,” and P.A. Bruce who concluded that Conjure served as a vent for the Negro’s “evil passions” (10).

Similarly, in *Baby of the Family*, alternate systems of belief (Voodoo/Conjure, American Indian forms of worship, etc.) are misrepresented by some characters as

devil/demon worship and as antithetical to Christianity. The nuns at St. Martin de Porres, the Catholic school Lena attends,

terrorized their students by telling stories they represented as factual about their adventures in the western United States, where they taught American Indian children. "I saw [. . .] people [. . .] possessed by the devil [. . .]. It was the devil in those poor people, the very devil that I saw with my own eyes. But the church in her infinite wisdom knows the power of Satan and has holy implements like holy water [. . .] to drive the demons of hell out." (Ansa 219-20)

Disparaging characterizations like these reinforce Lena's existing sense of fear and trepidation.

At school in the principal's office, Lena is frightened by another facet of Christio-Conjure, spirit possession. Spirit possession is one of the most significant features in African religion and, interpreted in Christian terms, it became "a central feature in expressive behavior in African American Christianity" ("Believer," Joyner 30). Lena's tendency to view her experience as "demon" possession rather than "spirit" possession represents the previously discussed tendency to classify foreign or unfamiliar religious/spiritual concepts as evil/demonic. When Lena experiences possession in the principal's office, she employs "the opposed concepts of good and evil, God and Satan, in Christian thinking" (Brown 10).

Ignorant of Christio-Conjure's designation of spirit possession as a sacred and divine gift, Lena classifies her experience as a "demon [taking] possession of her body" (Ansa 219). Reinscribing her complete and utter horror, the "strange unsummoned voice coming out of her mouth stunned" her and made her realize that "there was something wrong [. . .] [s]he might say or do or see anything" (216-17). Following her possession, her classmates ostracize her. Snubbed by her peers at school, this period represents a

particularly difficult episode in Lena's life. As she attempts to figure out what transpired in the principal's office, Lena recognizes that unlike her previous encounters with spirits, in this instance she is actually possessed by a spirit. Terrified by this realization, she turns to her Christian faith and exclaims, "Jesus, keep me near the cross!" (219). As Lena analyzes her latest and most frightening experience, her thought process functions within a Christio-Conjure frame of reference.

Her thoughts advance through three phases. First, she recalls her previous encounters with apparitions/spirits. She then contemplates the possibility of spirit possession. Finally, she appeals to the Christian savior, Jesus Christ for strength and comfort during this moment of crisis and fear. As Lena reflects upon her experience in the principal's office, each phase of her three-part analytical process represents a different aspect of Christio-Conjure. Like Nellie, however, Lena is cognitively unaware of her participation in Christio-Conjure and other than repairing inoperative objects by "putting the magic on them," she has no control over her metaphysical/paranormal experiences. While her bewildering experiences are understood and valued by informed practitioners of Christio-Conjure, because Lena is only formally exposed to Christianity, she is burdened with confusion, fear, and a fractured sense of self. Not until she experiences spiritual/psychological transformation through spirit contact with her grandmother is she able to recognize and appreciate her personal participation in Christio-Conjure.

Miss Lizzie

Miss Lizzie, Lena's grandmother, is the most complicated character in the novel. Like Nellie, her position on Christianity is clear, but her stance on Christio-Conjure is

convoluted. For example, as she reminisces about her late husband's affinity for New Orleans, "the city of Voudoun" (Teish 4), she discredits the Christio-Conjure tradition as "voodoo stuff" (Ansa 104), similar to Nellie's characterization of Nurse Bloom's Christio-Conjure practices as "hocus pocus" (60). Like Nellie, Miss Lizzie also relegates the belief and practice to a subjugated form of knowledge. Ironically, however, Nellie describes Miss Lizzie in precisely the same manner as she characterizes Nurse Bloom: "you know how she is about all this old-timey stuff, she's almost as bad as Nurse Bloom" (34).

Not only does Miss Lizzie tell stories about "haunts of all kinds" (42-43), but while discussing her late husband, she actually reveals her belief in the notion of being haunted; she admits waiting for the spirit of her husband to "haunt" her (104). Moreover, Miss Lizzie says that since Lena was born with a veil over her face that "others could see ghosts when looking over her shoulder" (56). When a baby owl enters the house through the chimney, she tells Lena that "a bird in the house is a sure sign that there's gonna be a death in the family" (243). In this passage she interprets a sign from nature as an omen of a future event, further exposing her latent Christio-Conjure beliefs. Following much mayhem, the owl crashes through the dining room window. Miss Lizzie insists upon quickly clearing up the mess and calculates she can have the window replaced before anyone notices the damage. That night, however, she dies in her sleep and Lena is grief-stricken, believing that if she had told someone about the evil omen of the owl, she could have prevented her grandmother's death.

After her death, Miss Lizzie appears to Lena to offer a sense of comfort and consolation, for in Christio-Conjure "the process of dying" is not "complete for up to five years. The spirits of the ancestors—the living dead—[are] the closest link between the

world of the living and the world of the spirits, because they [straddle] both worlds” (“Believer,” Joyner 34). As a spirit, Miss Lizzie encourages Lena to discuss her life-long hidden feelings of insecurity and insanity. With this guidance, Lena dispels the negative stigma associated with insanity and realizes that “our personalities are fragmented—disorganized team efforts trying to cope with the past—rather than the sane, unified wholes we anticipate in ourselves and in other people” (Stout 3-4).

In the novel, the visit from Miss Lizzie’s spirit represents a turning-point in Lena’s Christio-Conjure evolution. As such, Lena, in her world of apparitions and uncertainties, for once “felt lucky to be able to see ghosts” (Ansa 98 and 261). Like Rachel’s spirit, Miss Lizzie’s serves as Lena’s Christio-Conjure mentor. Moreover, Miss Lizzie’s spirit validates Christio-Conjure as a source of protection and preservation for the black female collective, and the historically denigrated aspects of Christio-Conjure, like spirit contact and spirit possession, are recovered, reclaimed, and extolled.

Miss Lizzie contextualizes Lena’s experiences in such a way that they make sense. Instead of focusing on sanity, Miss Lizzie embraces the notion of insanity and inverts the mainstream definition of it. She identifies insanity as a common characteristic among black women and says the struggles of life “made us that way” (262). She assures Lena that “[c]razy ain’t all bad [. . .]. Sometimes it’s the only thing that protects you” (262). Miss Lizzie suggests madness, for African American women, functions as a defense mechanism against historical forms of racio-gendered oppression. Additionally, in *Baby of the Family*, Christio-Conjure symbolically eradicates Lena’s sense of madness. She employs its tenets to reappropriate her frightening memories within the glorified legacy of her birth caul, a divine “gift from God” (16).

Miss Lizzie's spirit assumes the role of Lena's Christio-Conjuring mentor, guiding her toward a new understanding of her metaphysical powers. As a member of the spirit world Miss Lizzie recognizes and appreciates, in a manner she previously did not, the special, spiritual privileges bestowed upon her granddaughter and encourages Lena to develop her spirituality as a tool of self-empowerment. Furthermore, she denounces Nellie for ignoring Nurse Bloom's instructions and inhibiting Lena from becoming a "spiritually healthy being" (Teish 209). In short, as a spirit Miss Lizzie conveys the dire consequences of abandoning ritualistic acts.

At last, the mystery of Lena's birth caul is (un)veiled and the fragmented experiences of her life are recast as a sensible, seamless reality. As the story closes, the significance of Christio-Conjure is most apparent as Miss Lizzie explains to Lena, "what you are, baby, it's a gift. It's like in the Bible. It's your birthright. There's gifts that you're given in this world that you just can't throw away" (265). In this passage, not only does Miss Lizzie suggest that Lena is blessed with supernatural "gifts," but she further highlights the construct of Christio-Conjure by referencing the holy Bible while discussing Lena's "birthright," the caul. In death Miss Lizzie is wiser. Although she functions consciously as a Christian throughout most of the text, as a spirit, she discerns and affirms the validity of Christio-Conjure—not only as a general source of social resistance¹² exemplified by the spirit of Rachel—but more specifically as a mechanism for Lena's psychological decontamination and spiritual empowerment.

Cross-generational Christio-Conjure

Two significant figures in Lena's spiritual network, Rachel and Miss Lizzie, are ghosts, spirits whom Lena respects and reveres. The notion of ancestor reverence in

Christio-Conjure is rooted in the ancient West African “conviction that the spirit world [is] an integral part of the life force;” the dead are “believed to be concerned with and involved in the affairs of the living. The reverence for ancestral spirits is one facet of [. . .] a host of spirit beings [. . .] that monitor the activities of the living” (Smith-Wright 144-45). In the dominant culture this spiritual vestige of West African religious tradition has been appropriated within a secular frame, as ghost stories served “to discourage Blacks from moving around at night, unsupervised” (142). But black folklorists “altered these ghost stories” in ways that “extended the rich African oral tradition” (142), subverting the original intent of the dominant class. The ghost story in black women’s literature also functions as a tool of subversion, preserving historically maligned West African beliefs.

As the novel concludes, the spirit of Miss Lizzie fosters a sense of connection, urging Lena to visit Nurse Bloom, whose former status as *Mother Bloom* is symbolically restored. Indeed, Nurse Bloom’s “life-affirming powers” rise out of her “folklore past” (Lee 9), and what Nellie (the embodiment of Western ideology) discounts as Nurse Bloom’s subjugated knowledge, serves as the vital wisdom that helps Lena conquer her literal and figurative demons. Nurse Bloom’s “hocus-pocus” and “mumbo-jumbo” ultimately represent first-rate common sense, usurping Western thought in the novel. In the Christio-Conjure sub-genre of African American literature, the legacy of black lay midwives is commemorated. Texts featuring black lay midwives are “healing narratives” (Wilentz 1) mending not only the ruptured legacy of black lay midwives in America but also spiritually/psychologically restoring the entire African American female collective.

The midwife in African American women's literature¹³ is a healing figure; she functions as a metaphor for black women's collective recovery from racio-gendered historical oppression, for "[s]ometimes a whole people need *healing work*. Not a tribe, not a nation. Tribes and nations are just signs that the whole is diseased. The *healing work* that cures a whole people is the highest work, far higher than the cure of single individuals" (Armah 100 added emphasis). The black lay midwife is the central healer in black women's Christio-Conjure writing. In *Baby of the Family*, in addition to Nurse Bloom, other women too represent healing figures, namely Rachel and Miss Lizzie. While Lena never verbally cries for help, these three women intuit her psychological distress and respond to her emotional anguish and proffer hope and healing.

As the cultural phenomenon of call-response reflects the "soul" of African American culture, the trope of "*caul* and response" in *Baby of the Family* represents the "soul" of the narrative. The novel's emphasis on "group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective common good" validates the belief that "spiritual regeneration depends on the visitation of the Spirit, but the efforts of the total group are needed to bring that about" (*Talkin and Testifyin*, Smitherman 109). Likewise, Lena's "spiritual regeneration" is also contingent upon the nurturing efforts of all the women in novel. The entire text is grounded in the importance of female bonding and the significance of cultural ties among African American women, despite the torn relations and disjointed past fostered by a heritage rooted in American slavery. Throughout the novel Ansa weaves connections between the female characters and, via Lena, all the women in the narrative—Nellie, Nurse Bloom, Lizzie, and Rachel—are interconnected with and influenced by the power of Christio-Conjure.

In *Baby of the Family*, Ansa, as a literary Christio-Conjure woman, attempts to subvert disparaging cultural characterizations suffered by African Americans. She seeks to recover elements of African American culture derived “from Africanisms that tell us to respect” our ancestors and to make a connection between those “living and those who have passed on” (Carroll 21). In *Baby of the Family*, the apparitions/ghosts represent cultural ancestors who impart wisdom and promote spiritual/psychological healing. As well, Ansa fuses the Christio-Conjure element of spirit contact with the traditional notion of the ghost story, centralizing the image of the ghost in her narrative. Her presentation of the ghost story situates *Baby of the Family* within a lineage of Christio-Conjure women writers who also feature this device, including Rhodes, Bambara, Shange, Naylor, and Dash.

CHAPTER 4: REVOLUTIONARY¹ CHRISTIO-CONJURE

Overview

As a community activist and writer, Bambara, who lost her struggle with cancer in 1995, forged an inseparable bond between social consciousness and social criticism in the production of her art. In her work she skillfully exposes how social ills such as racism, sexism, and elitism impinge upon multiple aspects of humanity including art, religion, education, foreign policy, economics, medicine, ecology, psychology, sociology, and technology. Her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, integrates an array of these themes. Like Ansa in *Baby of the Family*, in this work Bambara depicts madness as a form of spiritual crisis, and like Rhodes in *Voodoo Dreams*, she also highlights the African American cultural significance of communal bonding. The core of the narrative focuses on individual mental instability, personified by the mental collapse of Velma, the protagonist. Expanding the novel's thematic scope, Bambara depicts tensions within the sphere of the black community represented by conflict in the 7 Arts Academy, an organization in the novel that promotes "performing arts, the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and humanities" (*Salt* 120). Finally, through the novel's broadest theme, Bambara exposes the dissonant element disrupting the entire town of Claybourne: a "split between employees of Transchemical and activists who oppose its presence (Velma is employed by both camps)" (Kelley 285).

Issues in *The Salt Eaters* range from the profoundly private to the overtly public; despite this range, however, the issues are interconnected and affect every character. Recognizing this extensive interconnection helps the reader decode Campbell's cryptic epiphany that "everything is everything" (*Salt*, Bambara 249). Further developing the

theme of interconnection, like Rhodes who moves beyond black and white racial issues in *Voodoo Dreams*, Bambara explores multiethnic intersections in *The Salt Eaters*, most evident in the presentation of the multicultural feminist group, the Seven Sisters.² But despite instances of multiethnic inclusion and broad cross-cultural analyses, like Rhodes in *Voodoo Dreams* and Ansa in *Baby of the Family*, Bambara integrates African “spiritual and healing traditions with those from Western religion” (Andrews 641) in *The Salt Eaters*, foregrounding the cultural/religious hybrid of Christio-Conjure.

The title of the novel evokes the Christio-Conjure component of natural healing, specifically the traditional healing properties associated with the substance of salt.³ Identifying salt as a matter used “to neutralize poisons” (“What Is It” 166), Bambara metaphorically transforms the function of this substance in the novel by presenting characters in search of a saline solution from the earth, a symbolic agent that supplies psychological healing and communal restoration. Further extending the theme of healing, in addition to the novel’s focus on the healing aspects of salt, Velma, the novel’s protagonist, is bestowed with the “calling” (*Salt*, Bambara 243) to heal others through Christio-Conjure. Though there is no evidence of Velma being born with a birth caul as a physical sign of her metaphysical power, she, like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, is nonetheless unwittingly “bless[ed]” (*Salt*, Bambara 219) with a Christio-Conjure “gift” (293).

In *The Salt Eaters*, Christio-Conjure is presented as both practice and belief. The three archetypal Christio-Conjure characters in the novel—Old Wife, Minnie, and Sophie—worship the Christian God as well as West African deities, including Damballah,⁴ Oshun,⁵ Oye,⁶ and Ogun.⁷ They profess Christian ideals, while

simultaneously demonstrating deference to ancestral spirits or loa. They participate in Christian prayer groups and/or attend services held in Christian chapels and interface directly with the spirit world. In addition, these women possess supernatural curative powers, which they use throughout the community offering services such as midwifery and psychic healing. Old Wife, Minnie, and Sophie are elderly female figures who not only perform physical healing but also impart spiritual and secular wisdom. As well, they acculturate newly converted African American women into Christio-Conjure and mentor them as their cultural heirs.

Although Gay Wilentz asserts that Bambara “places her wellness narrative in the Sea Islands” (56), the text does not support this assertion. Instead, like *Baby of the Family*, the novel is set in a fictitious Georgia town. The town’s name, Claybourne, is emblematic of the distinctive red-colored clay that blankets the earth throughout the Georgia mainland—a conspicuous contrast with the white, dusty soil of the neighboring Sea Islands. The action of the novel spans two hours during the “the annual spring festival of celebration and rebirth” (Hull 221). Due to the dual threats posed by a local group of militant blacks and the locally stored nuclear chemicals, the black community in Claybourne is mired in turmoil. The “confusion, chaos, and social inversion of carnival” (227) provide a symbolic backdrop for the individual and communal calamities featured in the novel. According to Bakhtin, carnival represents the “social consciousness of all the people” as members “of a continually growing and renewed people,” and it also represents “an element of victory” over “all that oppresses and restricts” (92). Thus, the carnival setting is particularly appropriate given the novel’s social liberation and spiritual renewal motif.

With Velma's Christio-Conjure healing underway, the narrative opens in the Southwest Community Infirmary *in medias res*. The Infirmary is where Dr. Meadows, trained at Meharry medical school like Dr. Williams in *Baby of the Family*, practices traditional Western medicine in the space he shares with his colleague Miz Minnie Ransom, community midwife and "fabled healer of the district" (*Salt*, Bambara 4). In the Infirmary "conventional medical treatments are integrated into the traditional healings" (Wilentz 69). Over the years, the spirit of the institution has been shaped and informed by grannies, midwives, root men, and conjure women (*Salt*, Bambara 107). Like the hospital in *Baby of the Family*, the black-founded and operated Infirmary is the physical site of Christio-Conjure service and expertise. With the maxim "HEALTH IS YOUR RIGHT" inscribed above its entrance, the Infirmary's establishment represents the unified effort of the "Free Coloreds of Claybourne" (120), reinforcing the text's theme of individual health and wholeness within the context of communal bonding.⁸

Velma's Dilemma

Unlike *Voodoo Dreams* and *Baby of the Family*, *The Salt Eaters* is not a coming of age story; Velma, the protagonist is a fully mature adult. Within the framework of Christio-Conjure, however, she languishes in spiritual infancy. In her youth, Velma is baptized as a Christian, and prior to her Christio-Conjure conversion in the Infirmary, Christianity is her sole source of spiritual sustenance. Demonstrating her Christian orientation, in order to restore a sense of calmness during a moment of nervousness and uncertainty, she "recites a Sunday school lesson" (104). But, as a child she reveals her latent Christio-Conjure orientation by questioning, "why is God called the alpha and omega?" (275). Since "God" in the Christio-Conjure idiom is a Christian referent,

Velma's query metaphorically challenges Christianity's monotheistic image of a one single, omniscient, omnipotent God responsible for the beginning and end of all human existence. Velma's youthful, inquisitive disposition signifies her unconscious desire to build upon and expand—not abandon—her Christian faith.

Velma's spiritual transformation is a central theme in the text. Like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, who ultimately eradicates her sense of madness by employing Christio-Conjure as a tool of spiritual empowerment, Velma too is forced to address and resolve issues of mental instability. The immediate source of her psychological instability is twofold: anguish at home and anxiety at work. At home she is subconsciously traumatized by her husband's prior infidelity; at work, as a computer programmer, she accesses classified information revealing a pending nuclear threat to Claybourne. Velma's concerns are both personal and political. She complains about her husband and son "driving her nuts [. . .] sexual harassment on the job [. . .] supervisors trying to do the shakedown [. . .] a migraine or nightmare or some ill-defined bad feeling she could not shake" (139-40). Within the context of "home, family, [and] marriage," she tries "to maintain the right balance" (241), but she is overwhelmed by conscious and subconscious sources of anxiety. Unable to effectively manage her life, she attempts suicide in an effort to "make herself unavailable to pain" (19).

In the midst of a nervous breakdown with her "essential self gone" (57), Velma experiences recurring visions of "mud mothers"⁹ (38). Her visions of these women include West African cultural markers such as calabashes, yams, and tribal facial markings. Their images lucidly convey a West African cultural connection. But instead of embracing the images of the mud mothers, which "reflect, on some level, [a]

primordial women-centered world [. . .] originating in Africa” (Wilentz 64), Velma is frightened by them. Similar to Lena’s reaction to her early encounters with spirits in *Baby of the Family*, Velma perceives these encounters as disturbing hallucinations. This reaction demonstrates her ostensible ignorance of the West African spiritual tradition, i.e. Conjure, and like the protagonist in *Voodoo Dreams*, she is culturally disconnected, psychologically fragmented, and spiritually underdeveloped. In order for Velma to recover from cultural “amnesia” (*Salt*, Bambara 258), she must “dig below the barriers organized [Christian] religion erected” (170) and explore new spiritual possibilities.

As in *Baby of the Family*, in *The Salt Eaters* too, traditional definitions of madness are redefined. Velma’s suicide attempt, for example, is an act commonly designated as a sign of madness in Western culture. Although no West African religion promotes suicide, several, however, assert that spirits of the deceased are active participants in the realm of the living. This belief provides the context for Velma to question whether “suicides reincarnate right away or have to wait around full term” (215). Velma’s appropriation of suicide as reincarnation, i.e. a new life, a new beginning, rather than a sinful act as defined by Christianity, signifies her spiritual dexterity and her willingness to consider new spiritual philosophies that can be incorporated into her practice of Christianity.

But despite the attempt to restore herself through the act of suicide, within the context of Christio-Conjure, she is unsuccessful because her effort is not a collective/communal act. Sophie censures Velma with a series of scathing questions: “did you think your life is yours alone to do with as you please? That I, your folks, your family, and all who care for you have no say in the matter?” (148). But rather than an

ending, the event paradoxically serves as a catalyst for Velma's Christio-Conjure spiritual/emotional rebirth. Old Wife, Minnie, and M'Dear Sophie rally around her and help birth a spiritually renewed, healthy and whole Velma who "learns a new way to be in the world" (104).

From Ancestors to the Unborn: Cross-generational Christio-Conjure

Old Wife is an ancestral spirit present at Velma's healing. Although deceased, like Membe in *Voodoo Dreams* and Rachel and Miss Lizzie in *Baby of the Family*, she communes with the living—yet she never interacts directly with Velma. Her role, instead, is as Minnie's guide during Velma's healing, and her relationship with Minnie reinscribes the Christio-Conjure role of ancestors in the affairs of the living. Minnie recalls that Old Wife "had a way of teaching us kids things" (57), and Old Wife serves as Minnie's mentor "one way and then another" (51) throughout the novel, both as a living being and as a spirit. Known as "Old Karen, the Old One, Wilder's woman, Wilder's Wife" (52), and indiscriminately characterized as a witch or haint,¹⁰ Old Wife represents the West African trickster figure. Though she is "the teller of tales no one would sit still to hear anymore" (52), Old Wife continues to dispense wisdom, mainly through "messages" (45) to Minnie. She defends against Minnie's playful assertion that she is a witch by countering, "that's how I chose to manifest myself this time" (295). Her response conveys a message of self-determination similar to that espoused by the spirit of Rachel in *Baby of the Family*. Old Wife's message, however, not only evinces her mastery of self-determination, but it also encourages Minnie and others in Claybourne to pursue the principle of self-empowerment. Old Wife's message supplies an example of how they too can consciously choose to "manifest" themselves.

In addition to this lesson of self-determination and empowerment, Old Wife substantiates Velma's re-conceptualization of suicide in terms of spiritual renewal rather than physical death by confirming "there is no [. . .] death in spirit" (56). Old Wife preaches "in our extremity is God's opportunity" (47), asserting that in moments of crisis, such as attempted suicide, God receives an opportunity to demonstrate His glory by rescuing the "spiritually impoverished" (133) from emotional despair. This revises the Christian view of suicide as an act of faithlessness against God, and converts it to an act of "extremity" providing the Lord with an "opportunity" to demonstrate the holy power of redemption. A dynamic character, Old Wife is honored and revered by Minnie as the "wisest woman in these parts" (45). A self-identified "good Christian" (43) and "servant of the Lord" (62), Old Wife encourages Minnie to attend chapel service, yet she also carries a gris gris sack. Most significantly, though, as a spirit incarnate, a living ancestor, Old Wife represents the synergy of Christianity and African-based religion.

As Old Wife's protégé, Minnie is a Christio-Conjure exemplar. Similar to Nurse Bloom in *Baby of the Family*, "Minnie represents a triumph of folk wisdom over scientific knowledge, of woman's culture over patriarchal dominance. She symbolizes the valorization of a specific black women's culture" (Butler-Evens 182). Possibly 100 years old (*Salt*, Bambara 41), she is the good woman with the gift, the mojo lady, and the swamphag. She, like Old Wife, is a timeless, ageless shape shifter, and her most relevant role in the novel is as Claybourne's Christio-Conjure high priestess. As a young woman, early in her spiritual development, Minnie attends Bible College (47) in nearby Barnwell, Georgia. This experience is ungratifying, and like Velma, she finds Christian doctrine only partially fulfilling. Upon her return to Claybourne, Old Wife sends Minnie a

message “about a gift unfolding” (53), and despite her studies at the Bible College, Minnie effectively “learns to pray” (54) only after she develops a rapport with Old Wife.

On the verge of her Christio-Conjure conversion, Minnie is seen “down on her knees eating dirt” (51). Although publicly interpreted as a sign of madness, her ingestion of the red Georgia clay symbolizes her access to “Clay”bourne’s healing saline solution. In the midst of her transformation, “squatting in the dirt” listening, “Minnie was told to clear the path that led up to the cliffs” and “fix the rainbow” and “build the chapel in The Mind;” there “she saw the *gift* and knew” the “telling” came from “the Source” (53-4 added emphasis). Through her transformation, Minnie is endowed with superhuman powers, a “gift” from “the Source” (54). In *The Salt Eaters*, the Source, which both science and religion attempt to clarify and define, represents the original agent of human existence that “no habit of language” (89) can accurately depict. Fixed within an endless string of signifiers, the precise image of the Source is impossible to capture. Multiple references both within and among cultures highlight the degree to which the Source is extra-linguistic, i.e. beyond language. In terms of religion, the Source is variously identified as Damballah, Yahweh, Jehovah, Christ, Allah, God, et al.

As the one God “groomed” (109), Minnie learns to read auras in addition to biblical scriptures. She also displays reverence for Oshun and the loa that inhabit the tree outside the Infirmary. Locally, Minnie is famous for physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing, and those who observe her healing sessions are “forced to acknowledge something more powerful than skepticism” (86). The public’s opinion of Minnie’s private work is critical since public and private boundaries are blurred within the text. As Wilentz notes, in *The Salt Eaters* “the source of health” is “both inside and

outside, particularly in terms of the relationship of the individual to the community and the individual's role in helping her community" (75). During Velma's healing session, Minnie urges her to release and "[f]orgive everyone, everything. Free them. Free self" (*Salt*, Bambara 18), thereby reinforcing the Christio-Conjure precept that individual and communal wellness are intimately and inextricably bound.

Like Minnie, Sophie too is "serious about her role, her calling" (293) as a Christio-Conjure mentor. A local midwife with "baby catching hands" (11), Sophie, as Velma's godmother, not only physically delivers Velma but also participates in her spiritual *rebirth* in the Infirmary. She is an archetypal Christio-Conjure character who cannot resist "praying for her goddaughter" (146) during the healing session. Sophie's proficiency in Conjure includes "out of body experiences" (Page 93) and dream interpretation. Displaying her Christian background, "she almost broke the spell" of Velma's healing with the "threat of an old gospel or line of scripture quivering under her tongue" (*Salt*, Bambara 149). Sophie temporarily exits the Infirmary during Velma's healing and embarks upon a symbolic journey "in search of a saline solution" (149); the journey is a metaphor for the desperate measures Sophie is willing to undertake in order to help restore her goddaughter's spiritual/emotional sense of "balance" (241). Like Minnie who values the restorative power of salt, Sophie also recognizes its capacity to heal and cure; moreover, she believes "you never really know a person until you've eaten salt together" (147).

Wilentz contends that prior to the healing, Sophie attempted to introduce Velma to ancestor reverence, but Velma was "too distracted to learn" (65). Sophie is baffled by Velma's refusal to accept her "role as potential healer of the community" (65). Even

during Velma's youth, Sophie attempts to instill in her the Christio-Conjure wisdom ingrained in the Infirmary's five pillars: God is; God is all and all is one; there are spirits; there are prophets; there'll be a day of Restoration (*Salt*, Bambara 263). Characterized as a Christ-like figure by Susan Willis, Velma's early Christio-Conjure lesson not only foreshadows Claybourne's eminent revolutionary "day of Restoration," but also speaks to Velma's seminal role in the event.

Velma plays a central role in Claybourne's transformation, and her healing is a transformative event for those who witness it. Nadeen, a pregnant Claybourne adolescent, experiences her rite of passage vicariously through Velma's healing. As one of the Infirmary spectators, Nadeen senses "a kinship with the woman she did not even know" (106) and symbolically establishes a connection with the mature, supportive African American women's collective in Claybourne headed by Old Wife, Minnie, and Sophie. This new sense of connection allows Nadeen to "transcend her devalued status and affirm an identity" (Butler-Evens 183). While observing Velma's healing, Nadeen instantaneously recognizes "she [is] a woman" (*Salt*, Bambara 106). She sheds her sense of fear and analyzes her personal dilemma with new insight: "[h]ow come she was old enough to sign the papers giving consent for the baby to be taken care of when it came, but wasn't old enough to sign for herself?" (106). Nadeen is inspired by the Christio-Conjure activity in the Infirmary; newly empowered and self-directed, she now rejects the duplicitous and once intimidating policies imposed upon her.

In addition to helping highlight the numerous transformations engendered by Velma's Christio-Conjure conversion, Nadeen's narrative also reinscribes the vital Christio-Conjure principle of cross-generational bonding. While communal bonding

promotes wide-range current community cohesiveness, cross-generational bonding speaks to the “shape, scope, thrust” (37) and future progress of the African American community. In this vein, the image of Nadeen, Buster and their unborn child “powerfully intertwines the private romantic relationship and the larger organic community” (Alwes 359). Nadeen bears a dual significance as she symbolizes the future generation and literally embodies the one beyond. Identifying Velma’s Christio-Conjure conversion as “the real thing” (*Salt*, Bambara 111), Nadeen’s cognitive transformation in the Infirmary metaphorically extends the transmission of Christio-Conjure to future generations. Similar to the five generations of Maries in *Voodoo Dreams*, this collection of women—Nadeen, Velma, Sophie, Minnie, and Old Wife—represents four generations of Christio-Conjure practitioners in Claybourne, ensuring the future survival of the spiritual construct.

Velma’s Private Healing as a Public Act

It is not mere happenstance that Velma’s private transformation occurs within the public space of the Infirmary’s lobby. Nor is it coincidental that Velma cannot heal herself, but must rely upon the aid and support of others. In Christio-Conjure, transformation is only achieved through communal effort. While the onlookers in the Infirmary anxiously await Velma’s conversion, metaphysically she flees that space on a “hunt for balance and kinship” and runs “to the park and hunt[s] for self” (267). In a narrative twist, Velma’s spirit abandons the Infirmary, the communal space where her healing transpires. Yet her private quest for self continues in yet another public setting—the park—where she “hunts” for balance.

While Velma is mentally transported to the park, onlookers in the Infirmary continue their physical observation: “Nadeen saw it happen, saw something drop away from [Velma’s] face [. . .]. Whatever it was that had fallen away was showing her another way to be in the world” (101). Sophie enthusiastically speculates, “[o]nce Minnie brought Velma through perhaps the girl at last would be ready for training” (293). Additionally, Doc Serge, director of the Infirmary, is eager to participate in Velma’s Christio-Conjure mentoring; the narrator notes that “[h]e would work with this one. He [. . .] waited for Minnie [. . .] to bring the woman through this first phase, to release her, hand her over” (268).

During the healing session, the prayer group participants assume an active role, offering a host of prayers on Velma’s behalf. Consequently, “the collective mind grew [. . .] promising the perfect fruit of communal actions” (146). But in Christio-Conjure, the promise of “the perfect fruit” cannot be fulfilled without the aid of the ancestors. The loa who reside in the tree outside the Infirmary are presumably present at Velma’s healing. The loa are weary with neglect and bad press, “weary with so little to perform” (146). But despite being disregarded, they “attended each generation—messenger, teacher, healer, clairvoyant, clairaudient, clairfeelant, clairdoent” (146). The diminished cultural status of the loa illustrates the neglect of Conjure beliefs in Claybourne. As such, Velma’s transformation not only signals a synthesis of Christian and West African religious philosophy, but it also signifies the vindication of the formerly neglected Conjure tradition and the denigrated status of the loa in particular.

Further extending the ancestral theme, Sophie connects Velma’s suicidal behavior with ancestral reverence in the following analogy: “[m]aybe the act of trying to sever a

vein” was “like going to the caves, a beginning” (147-48). Velma’s spiritual rebirth is explicitly linked to the mud mothers who dwell in caves. Velma must recall her “roots in the sacred” (166) and embrace the image of the mud mothers as cultural markers of the African past, “the best of her people’s traditions” (258). Like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, Velma’s Christio-Conjure conversion will expose her to West African religious “roots [. . .] driven far underground” (294). With her “Swahili¹¹ wailing-whistle” (149), Velma attempts to reconnect at last with her African spiritual roots. In *The Salt Eaters*, “it is the meeting with the ancestors that brings both the individual and, indirectly, the community back to health” (Wilentz 75). Finally, Velma “begins to accept the mud mothers” and her personal role in passing on cultural traditions (75).

At one point during her healing Velma declares that “[h]ealth is my right” (119), which prompts Minnie to discuss “the burdens of the healthy” (119). Minnie warns, “wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well” (10); in addition, she queries, “[w]hat will you do when you are well [. . .] decide what you want to do with wholeness” (220). For Velma, health is more than her “right,” it is also her responsibility. Minnie’s remarks remind Velma of Sophie’s credo: “always give back, always take care” (229). With these messages from her mentors, Velma finally stops “trying to resist” (248) her Christio-Conjure calling.

Sophie, having “waited a long time for her godchild’s gift to unfold,” believes “Velma would begin to see what she’d been blind to” (293). As Wilentz observes, “[t]hrough her acceptance of her gift, Velma takes on the role for which she has been chosen: a potential healer” she “moves toward wellness, away from the affliction of disconnectedness, knowing that being well has its responsibilities” (75). Velma’s

psychic scars are symbolically healed when the “red and black bracelets of flaking flesh” (*Salt*, Bambara 111)—physical wounds from her attempted suicide—are inexplicably healed by Minnie in the presence of the Infirmary witnesses. Restored by the public act of her private healing, Velma comes “alive in a new way [. . .] ready for training” (269). She is now prepared to assume her role in perpetuating Christio-Conjure’s legacy in Claybourne.

Claybourne’s Spiritual Revolution

Reflecting Bambara’s perception of the black community as “at war” against oppression and self “ambush” (“Salvation” 47), *The Salt Eaters* contains integral themes of revolution and activism. Bambara incorporates violent images of guns, bombs and ammunition into the novel’s festival scene. But despite the images of violence, the characters in the novel are actually preparing for an ideological revolution. As such, the aim of the Claybourne’s revolution replicates the objectives of the novel’s community-based groups like Women for Action and the 7 Arts Academy, which seek to “develop, de-mystify, build, consolidate and escalate” (*Salt*, Bambara 93) both the spiritual and technological consciousness of black community in Claybourne. Moreover, the ominous storm brewing on Claybourne’s “Day of Restoration” (263) reflects Bambara’s focus on activism. The storm ushers in the “thunderous beginning of the new humanism, the new spiritism” (248). Sophie theorizes that “[n]ot all wars have casualties,” some “struggles between old and new ideas, some battles between ways of seeing have only victors. Not all dying is the physical self” (219). Therefore, though a part of Velma may have “died” (273) in the Infirmary, she is now equipped to revolutionize Claybourne through Christio-Conjure. In *The Salt Eaters*, in order to achieve revolutionary restoration, the

fractured self must become whole and the divided community consciousness must be unified.

In the absence of such cohesion, however, Bambara situates much of her narrative within the cultural chasm of science and religion, technology and spirituality. This cultural debate—like some of the characters in *The Salt Eaters*—seems ageless, and its critical treatment is extensive. Newman provides a general framework for the debate, highlighting the Western tendency to privilege science over religion. He asserts that even though “religion is one of the primary forms of human experience and culture [. . .] technology has gained more cultural importance than religion” (1-2). Analyses that promote the privileged status of science over religion argue that “religion is no longer a vital concern of most contemporary thinkers” (Muller 317). According to Barbour, “Secular man trusts science, not God, to fulfill his needs” (3). Moreover, Ladrière contends that “at the same time of this disappearance of the sacred, there is also a sort of devaluation of certain types of language, which are not those of technology: symbolic language for example” (67). These perspectives chronicle the devaluation of sacred paradigms at the expense of the elevated cultural status of science and technology.

A vast number of critics, however, oppose the scientific hierarchy espoused by Western culture. Berdyaev protests that “the chief cosmic force which is now at work” is “technics” (80). Man, he says, “has become a slave to his own marvelous invention, the machine;” although “he has ceased to believe in miracles, man still believes in the miracle of technics” (Berdyaev 80-81). Equally as scathing, Newman posits that “human fascination with human powers and human creations has become so excessive that people believe that they can now do without the spiritual context in which human activity has

hitherto been rendered meaningful” (119). Velma faces this dilemma in *The Salt Eaters* as she struggles to “balance” her technical and spiritual selves (*Salt*, Bambara 267).

Such balance, however, is evident in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture: “the temple school, which provided the only institutional form of education, taught mathematics along with religious mysteries” (Forbes 45). As well, the craftsmen and technologists were members of guilds that “were first of all religious organizations devoted to worship of the patron-god. Hence technical operations were still accompanied by religious rites and ceremonies” (Forbes 44). In the novel, not only Velma, but all of Claybourne lacks the technical and spiritual balance promoted in the Old Testament; Spengler notes that

the awesome God of the Old Testament has instilled in men creative skills so that they can build his holy kingdom on earth [. . .]. The engineering impulse comes to man as a gift from God. Material enterprise is [. . .] to be pursued energetically with the service of God always kept uppermost in mind. The most worth work is [. . .] the building of tabernacles and temples and the bringing of offerings to the Lord. But technological effort directed toward prosperity for society is also considered worthy [. . .]. Moses made it clear to the Israelites that they were being given a land of abundance. (9)

Like Spengler who reconciles religion and technology, Chauchard concludes that both are different methods of approaching the same end: “[r]eligion’s task [is to] explain everything. It is to give the highest, ontological explanation, not to make up the scientific one. The task of science is to explain things at the level of phenomena, not to give a metaphysical explanation” while “[s]cientific and religious explanations are both concerned with the whole of the material world” (75-80). Through the *Salt Eaters*, Bambara contributes to this cultural debate and substantiates Chauchard’s premise that

science and religion are, at bottom, disparate cultural devices used to decipher the same reality.¹²

Velma personifies the cultural rupture between the technical and the spiritual, and throughout the novel she seeks balance. On one level, she faces the challenge of integrating ancestral West African religious beliefs with her Christian faith in her quest for spiritual balance; beyond that challenge, she must reconcile her technical and spiritual personas in order to “be whole to see whole” (*Salt*, Bambara 92). She must be immersed in Christio-Conjure and must also achieve a harmonious union of the spiritual and technical aspects of her life. Since Velma’s conditions and concerns represent a microcosm of the conditions and concerns of Claybourne’s entire African American community, the quest to unify this cultural chasm permeates the entire novel.

In order to overcome “[t]he struggle against industrial arrogance and heedless technology” (281), Claybourne must enact a collective battle. Several in Claybourne are cognizant of the disruptive Western divide between technology and spirituality and articulate their concerns from a number of platforms. It is Campbell, however, Claybourne’s former child-prodigy and current resident reporter/waiter, who, through a series of cognitive revelations, discovers that “all the systems were the same at base—voodoo, thermodynamics, I Ching, astrology, numerology, alchemy, metaphysics, everybody’s ancient myths—they were all interchangeable” (210). Moreover, he is excited by “the idea taking shape, so simple a connection [. . .]. Of course, everything was everything [. . .]. Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the *law of time*” (210 added emphasis). Campbell situates the Dahomean serpent deity, thermodynamics, and Christian philosophy within the framework of “the

law of time.” Since time is a universal concept in human experience, through “the law of time” Campbell symbolically unifies a series of culturally fragmented bodies of knowledge. His sudden epiphany reveals that seemingly disconnected systems of belief simply represent a variety of cultural approaches used to decipher and define a single, seamless human reality.

Sophie posits that the cultural rupture identified and symbolically unified by Campbell “had been developing for centuries [. . .] beginning with the move toward the material and away from the natural” (92). Doc Serge insists that the key to unifying science and technology is a matter of understanding “simple laws.” He asserts, “[s]imple laws is all [. . .] [but] [. . .] they don’t teach basic principles in the schools. So people have no discipline about living. They have no religion [. . .] And what is religion [. . .]. It’s a technology of living. And what do I mean by technology? The study and the application of the laws that govern the events in our lives”¹³ (126-127). Further emphasizing the cultural significance of “the law,” Doc Serge professes, “I love myself as I love The Law” as “I love the Master’s Mind [. . .] self-love produces the gods and the gods are genius” (136-37). By equating the gods with genius, Doc Serge metaphorically bridges the cleft between the emotional and the intellectual, the spiritual and the scientific.

Advocating new alliances and characterizing Bambara’s commitment to community activism, a tall man “with a bow tie” (125) announces to a crowd of listeners: “I’m here to jolt you back into your original right minds [. . .]. History is calling us to rule again and you lost” souls never recognize “the teachers come among you to prepare you for the transformation, never recognizing the *synthesizers* come to forge the new

alliances, or the *guides* who throw open the new footpaths” (125-126 added emphasis). This activist’s message of synthesizing new alliances is explicitly analogous to the messages of unification espoused by Sophie and Doc Serge. However, as an activist, this unnamed speaker employs a public venue in order to disperse his message to Claybourne’s masses.

Both as a synthesizer and guide, Velma reconciles her technological self, as a computer programmer, with her spiritual self, newly converted in Christio-Conjure. As Claybourne’s messiah she balances her scientific and spiritual training and serves as “a model” for “fools whose faith resided in a science that only filled people’s heads with useless structures, senseless clutter” (147). Her ideological transformation facilitates the metaphorical union between technology and spirituality in the novel. The merger represents a revolutionary act because it unifies fractured and disjointed public issues and private personalities in Claybourne. Indeed, this narrative illustrates that Christianity and Conjure are “not at all separate, much less conflicting” (210). Rather than a violent *coup d’etat*, Bambara promotes balance and cultural unification based upon an overthrow of all socially divisive concepts. Previously, “Claybourne hadn’t settled on its identity”¹⁴ (181), but following its spiritual revolution, its emergent Christio-Conjure identity is crystallized.

Christio-Conjure as The Real Thing

In Claybourne where “all the systems [are] the same at base” and “everything is everything” (210), Christio-Conjure is privileged as “the real thing” (111). More significantly, it is featured as an African American women’s thing. *The Salt Eaters* cogently operates within a womanist framework as a black feminist work “committed to

survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female” (Walker xi original emphasis). Fragmented male characters in the novel like Campbell, Obie, Dr. Meadows, Fred, and Porter are spiritually healed and renewed. Nonetheless, Bambara unmistakably privileges the experiences of black women throughout this work. Principally, the image of the black woman, historically disparaged, is exonerated and glorified in *The Salt Eaters*. The Infirmary is “the real place” and Minnie is “the real thing” (113). Her abilities seem boundless. She can calm fretful infants, treat nervous disorders, cure gynecological ailments, and dissolve cancerous lumps (113). Her curative powers far exceed the level of care offered by the Western medical establishment, and her extraordinary capabilities mark her as superhuman. In the novel, both she and Old Wife are reincarnated in flesh; thus, their cultural status is elevated beyond the characteristic reverence granted to the ancestors. Unlike ancestral spirits who are reincarnated in spirit only, Minnie and Old Wife are deified as physically immortal.

In a particularly telling scene during Velma’s healing session, Minnie coaches Velma, “[g]rowl all you want, sweetheart” (41). Minnie hasn’t heard “a good ole deep kneebend from-the-source growl such as that in some nineteen million years” (41). She tells Velma, “[y]ou gonna be alright,” it’s all “a matter of time. The Law of Time. And soon, sweetheart” this “will all be yours” (41). By alluding to “the law of time,” Minnie aligns herself with the other enlightened characters in the novel that honor this law as the perpetual unifying force of human experience. Moreover, though Velma and Minnie are characterized as “cut from the same cloth” (62), in this passage, Minnie not only distinguishes herself as immortal, older than even the “primordial” (Wilentz 64) mud

mothers, but she also solidifies her bond with Velma by bequeathing to her a legacy of immortality, intimating that soon “this will all be yours” (*Salt*, Bambara 41).

Lastly, during the healing, Minnie identifies Velma’s growl as “from-the-source”—the same Source, presumably, that granted Minnie the divine “gift” of superhuman power. The growl situates Velma within a framework of divinity. Interestingly, Velma offers her community something Minnie cannot: reconciliation of the sacred and the scientific. Velma, “divinely healthy [and] whole” (148), ultimately earns elevated status in the novel as Minnie’s successor and as the future Christio-Conjure high priestess of Claybourne. In addition to its thematic content, *The Salt Eaters* also features Christio-Conjure as narrative style. Through stream-of-consciousness monologue and seemingly random dialogue, the narrative structure of the novel, like the Christio-Conjure paradigm itself, illustrates that all issues—individual and communal—are on some level related and interconnected. The notion of the collective resonates throughout the novel, and the narrative strategy highlights a bilateral exchange between the protagonist and the Claybourne community at large, culminating in a revolutionary restoration of balance.

CHAPTER 5: CHRISTIO-CONJURE ACTIVISM

Overview: *Sistahs* in the Struggle

While Bambara portrays revolutionary Christio-Conjure in *The Salt Eaters*, Shange offers the image of three emerging Christio-Conjure activists in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Shange is best known for her “performance pieces that blend poetry, music, and dance” (Valade 331). In her performance pieces as well as in her novels and poetry, she examines “the metaphysical dilemma of being alive, female, and black” (331). In this chapter I analyze the title characters in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* within the context of their Christio-Conjure spiritual evolution. Throughout this novel, Christio-Conjure is represented by belief in the Christian God, demonstration of Christian faith through song, participation in Christian faith through prayer, spirit contact, divine spirit possession, ancestral reverence, and goddess worship. Additionally, in the text Christio-Conjure involves the praxis of thought/belief coupled with action/experience. The protagonists are multidimensional, and their experiences include both Christianity (instilled by their mother) and Conjure (practiced in their daily lives). Each sister *believes* in Christianity—from the perspective of faith—but *participates* in Conjure—from the perspective of practice; the two spiritual paradigms fuse in the novel, providing the sisters with a balanced worldview.

Partially set in Charleston, South Carolina¹ during the Civil Rights movement, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is based upon the mystery, enchantment, and empowerment associated with Christio-Conjure. In the novel, the title characters function as “sisters” on multiple levels. In the black vernacular, Smitherman identifies the term *soul sistah* as “a generic reference to an African American woman” (*Black Talk* 211). But in 1966,

during the Black Liberation movement, the term assumed a radical connotation when Stokley Carmichael unleashed the resounding cry for “black power” (*Talkin and Testifyin*, Smitherman 40); at that time, the *soul* in *soul sistah* became “the essence of life; feeling, passion, emotional depth” believed to be “derived from struggle, suffering, and having participated in the Black experience” (*Black Talk*, Smitherman 211). Within this context, Shange’s protagonists represent not only biological sisters, but *soul sistahs* too, for in addition to the inexorable struggle associated with their personal, evolving sense of womanhood, they also participate in the collective political struggle of African diasporic women.

Hilda Effania—a weaver—names each of the girls after a tree used in the process of dying cloth: Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo (Strandness 12). As a weaver, Hilda Effania has a special affinity for the various colored cloths she produces, and her daughters’ names symbolize a distinct bond between the three sisters and their mother (12). The cloth for each girl represents something both “useful and esthetic,” and symbolizes her connection with the rest of the world (12). Moreover, the roots and the barks of the three trees after which the sisters are named serve as traditional medicinal ingredients in various healing remedies, so their names also signify the latent curative powers each sister possesses (12). Ultimately, through Christio-Conjure they spiritually transform themselves and become healing forces in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, Shange’s protagonists are inundated with Christian ideals in their home. Hilda Effania, who provides her daughters with a solid Christian foundation, finds it difficult to accept the non-traditional, non-Christian, often

African-centered beliefs her daughters espouse. She reflects upon Sassafrass's celebration of Kwanzaa,² for example, and wonders "*where [she] had failed*" (Shange 132 original emphasis). On the other hand, she is excited about Cypress's civil rights activism and shows her support within a Christian context by noting that "the Lord will look kindly on the benefits you're going to do for Negro Christians" (209). She uses correspondence, too, as a platform to promote her Christian beliefs, preaching to Indigo in a letter: "*The Lord will set you upon a path of decent pleasures, sure as He makes a way for honest toil. Saints be praised*" (75 original emphasis). While Hilda Effania professes and overtly practices Christianity, her daughters only occasionally demonstrate a Christian frame of reference. Instead, from the standpoint of praxis, various aspects of Conjure, discussed in detail in following sections, ultimately shape the formation of each sister's identity. Yet they never abandon or dismiss their Christian faith. In fact, elements of Christianity, though subliminal, are omnipresent in each sister's life, as she stores her Christian beliefs in a psychological reservoir and reflexively draws upon Christian beliefs as a coping mechanism for challenges and obstacles encountered in life.

As Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo chart their individual courses of womanhood, they experience distinct forms of physical and/or psychological dislocation. Eventually, however, they come full-circle, reconnect with their cultural roots, and employ a unique variation of Christio-Conjure as a vehicle for healing and liberation. In Los Angeles, Sassafrass, the oldest daughter, is physically disconnected from her southern home and cultural roots in Charleston. She becomes entwined in an emotionally abusive relationship with Mitch, a musician and fellow artist. To assuage her sense of alienation, she continues to practice the art of weaving she learned from her mother. Following a

brief separation, Sassafrass and Mitch reunite and move to Baton Rouge to join the New World Found Collective, which offers its members “spiritual redemption” (213). There, in the Christio-Conjure tradition of Luisah Teish, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marie Laveau, Sassafrass joins the Collective and becomes a “priestess of Oshun”³ (215). Finally, after a “mounting” (a form of spirit possession documented by Hurston in *Tell My Horse*), Sassafrass summons the strength to purge her body and mind of Mitch and returns to her mother in Charleston, the site of her Christian home.

Cypress, Hilda Effania’s second daughter, is also physically dislocated as she pursues a dance career in San Francisco and New York. Exemplified by the lioness dancer in Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, the art of dance⁴ in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* represents an integral element in Christio-Conjure. For Cypress, “dancing is a sensual experience that links her with the rest of the world” as she uses her “body [to] interpret the world” (Shange 185). Additionally, Cypress discerns that dancing connects her and her African American viewing audience with their ancestral past. As an artist, all of Cypress’s healing is achieved through dance; the dance restores her personal spirit and functions as a therapeutic device for her viewing audience.

While her sisters, Sassafrass and Indigo, summon their female ancestors for revitalization, Cypress initially turns to her peers. She falls in love with Idrina, a fellow dancer, but when the lesbian affair ends in betrayal, she spirals into despondency and abandons her art. She experiences a series of painful lesbian affairs and is only able to purge her melancholia when she stumbles across the soothing music of an old friend from home. Reunited, she and Leroy share a loving, harmonious relationship. Like Cypress, Leroy also wishes to blend the best of European and African art forms; he is a musician

trained in the jazz milieu, yet he has also mastered Western concert music. Clearly, Leroy and Cypress, as artists, share a culturally integrated frame of reference. Like Cypress's dance, Leroy's music⁵ is also an integral element in Christio-Conjure. This common bond highlights their degree of compatibility and foreshadows their imminent union.

Like Sassafrass and Cypress, Indigo too struggles to create a comfortable and meaningful sense of self. However, unlike her older sisters, Indigo never departs from the South. Instead of geographical/cultural dislocation, she experiences psychological dislocation. Raised as a staunch Christian, Indigo has no means of interpreting the Conjure-related phenomena she experiences and creates. Like Lena in *Baby of the Family* and Velma in *The Salt Eaters*, she too lacks exposure to Conjure principles and practices. But by the time she is pre-pubescent, various members of the community, including Sister Mary Louise, Uncle John, and Aunt Haydee, help assign meaning to her experiences by introducing her to the blended Christio-Conjure ideology that shapes her life in Charleston and on Difuskie Island.

In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Christio-Conjure specifically functions as a method of organizing knowledge. Davis and Schiefer identify knowledge as "part of a discourse, as having a sender and receiver—in other words, as having agency" (600). For the characters in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Christio-Conjure, as both discourse and agency, is a device used to make sense of the world. As discourse, Christio-Conjure also functions as a form of power. Power, according to Paul A. Bové, opens "specific fields of possibility; it constitutes entire domains of action, knowledge, and social being by shaping the institutions and disciplines" in which we "make ourselves" (58). The title

characters in Shange's novel, as they struggle with various issues of black womanhood, employ Christio-Conjure as a vehicle for psychological liberation and spiritual empowerment in the process of self-creation.

Sassafrass as Priestess

Since Hilda Effania rears her daughters as devout Christians—it is no surprise that during times of sorrow, Sassafrass, like Abigail in *Mama Day*, finds comfort and solace in cherished Christian hymns like

“His Eye Is on the Sparrow, and I Know He’s Watchin’ Me” or “Jesus is Just Awright with Me, Jesus is Just Awright with Me” and “I Come to the Garden Alone” [. . .]. Sassafrass would sing her old time praises to the Lord louder, until everyone got quiet, and she shushed too, eventually, or maybe cried or sat among all her woofs and stared at the fading floral-pattern floor. (Shange 102-03)

Christian hymns function as a coping mechanism for Sassafrass. But in addition to the Christian-based consciousness instilled by her mother, Sassafrass is also exposed to an African diasporic perspective during her formative years. As a child, she longs for her father who has died at sea and visits the wharf where she listens to diasporic tales:

after school she watched the men tyin knots / fixin nets & she figured her daddy knew all that / & he could sing too like the sailors & dance like the west indians / who was crew on a lotta boats in the seamy port of Charleston [. . .] sassafrass wd [. . .] listen to the tales of other colored folks’ lives in the islands & as far off as new guinea. she tried to imagine [. . .] the cloth & the dance & who were their spirits / did they believe in jesus or were there other gods / & other heavens [. . .] sassafrass decided [. . .] she shd go every where there were dark folks [. . .] & she wd write it all down so other children wdnt feel lost & think they were stupid ninnies / like miz fitzhugh told her / “it’s too bad you a lil ninny, sassafrass, or i’d take you with me on this cruise” / & to the surprise of the spry seafarers / sassafrass announced / “i’ma be a conjah”⁶ they laughed

incredulously / saying / “you awready a geechee⁷ / how much more magic you want?” (108-9 original emphasis)

Her childhood curiosity regarding blended forms of worship is illustrated in the above passage as she considers belief in both “jesus” and “other gods/& other heavens.” In addition, she proclaims her future role as “a conjah,” vowing to vindicate African and Indian deities. While this is indeed a prophetic proclamation, as Sassafrass develops a set of Conjure-based sensibilities, she never eschews her fundamental Christian beliefs. Inevitably, she fashions a syncretized religious worldview.

In the process of self-transformation, before vindicating deities, Sassafrass must first achieve self-vindication. In Los Angeles, however, when she becomes involved with Mitch, her “cosmic lover and wonder of wonders” (78), instead of focusing on her writing, she directs her creative energy toward satisfying Mitch’s physical/emotional needs as well as his ego. Devoted to Mitch, she becomes increasingly dislocated from the vital traditions of her past. When she designs a vagina-shaped wall-hanging decorated with sequin and feather in honor of Josephine Baker,⁸ he criticizes her work as inappropriate and challenges Sassafrass’s self-identity as she defines it through her art. He not only attempts to repress Sassafrass’s sexuality, but he also dismisses the symbolic significance of her wall hanging, created in honor of a black female symbol of sexual liberation and social activism. Mitch’s criticism metaphorically nullifies Sassafrass’s tribute to Baker.

As she becomes consumed with pleasing Mitch, Sassafrass is simultaneously consumed with despair. Mitch designates Sassafrass as *his* woman, *his* possession and insists that she listen to his friend, Otis, recite a poem entitled “Ebony Cunt.” Sassafrass’s rage finally erupts, and she refuses to listen to them “talk about black

women” and “celebrate [her] inherited right to be raped” (89). Sassafrass silences Mitch’s chauvinistic friends and retaliates against his incessant attempts to restrict her artistically and dominate her sexually. Here, she takes her first step toward transformation and self-healing and initiates the symbolic journey that reconnects her with her ancestral past. In addition to verbal retaliation against Mitch, during her psychological transformation, Sassafrass reflects upon and reclaims her inherited craft as a weaver—through which she taps her creativity as a writer. In doing so, Sassafrass reclaims and reaffirms her artistic inheritance from previous generations of women weavers. Sassafrass’s reclamation and affirmation signals a turning point in her self-transformation. Despite Mitch’s devaluation of her art, she reaches back toward her artistic foremothers in an effort to liberate herself from Mitch’s oppression. Declaring, “*I am sassafrass / a weaver’s daughter*” (91 original emphasis), Sassafrass creates a sense of connection and contact by practicing this art form passed through generations of women in her family. The art provides a haven where Sassafrass retreats to reconnect with the familiar.

Sassafrass temporarily leaves Mitch because of his drug abuse and visits Cypress in San Francisco. There, she experiences contact with the spirit of the legendary blues singer and cultural icon, Billie Holiday.⁹ Sassafrass’s connection with the generations of women weavers and with the spirit of Billie Holiday reflects the matrilineal aspect of Christio-Conjure. In addition, the significance of song¹⁰ presented in the excerpt below includes the act of singing, which is an integral element in Christio-Conjure. In *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones discusses song and its powerful role in “Afro-Christian religion”

(81). In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, the spirit of the blues singer encourages Sassafrass to return to the writing projects she has abandoned:

from out of the closet came Billie, The Lady [. . .]. "It's the blues Sassafrass, that's keepin' you from your writing, and the spirits sent me because I know all about the blues [. . .] that's who I am [. . .]. Don't ya know we is all sad ladies because we got the blues, and joyful women because we got our songs? Make you a song, Sassafrass, and bring it out so high all us spirits can hold it and be in your tune [. . .] we need you to sing as best you can; that's our nourishment, that's how we live [. . .]. So make us some poems and stories, so we can sing a liberation song. Free us from all these blues and sorry ways". (Shange 80-81 original emphasis)

Sassafrass's encounter with Billie Holiday is significant on three levels. First, it represents Sassafrass's contact with the spirit world, which signifies her actual participation in the practice of Christio-Conjure. Secondly, it situates her within a community of black women—specifically along a continuum of black women artists. Finally, it elevates her beyond the realm of self-healer to communal healer and also illustrates her ability to heal the spirits of her artistic ancestors. In short, through contact with the spirit of Billie Holiday, Sassafrass, newly introduced to Christio-Conjure, is empowered to heal the broken spirit of the entire black female collective. Sassafrass summons her creative energy and declares, "*i am yr fruit / i shall create new altars / new praises & be ancient among you*" (110 original emphasis). She flatly rejects her previous perceptions of reality that have allowed her to tolerate physical, psychological, and emotional abuse from Mitch. As a Christio-Conjure practitioner, Sassafrass seeks to establish a new aesthetic, one based upon a set of shared cultural experiences designed to foster a healthy existence, both physically and spiritually, for the black female diaspora.

But at this point in her narrative, Sassafrass's spiritual/psychological Christio-Conjure transformation is incomplete and despite the encouragement offered by her spiritual ancestors, and the comforting environment provided by Cypress, she returns to Mitch. Together they seek "spiritual redemption" (213) in the New World Found Collective in Baton Rouge. The Collective is an afrofemcentric haven that offers Sassafrass a safe, nurturing space to fully transform into a Christio-"*Conjah*" (109). During a ritualistic ceremony held by the Collective, the spirit of the goddess Oshun possesses Sassafrass. Though she has prayed for a child, she is unwittingly pregnant. During her "mounting"¹¹ however, the spirit of Oshun reveals her pregnant state, and under possession, Sassafrass berates Mitch for his arrogance and blatant insolence toward her, the spirits, and the gods.

The possession scene represents a critical moment in Sassafrass's spiritual evolution. Empowered by the spirit of Oshun, Sassafrass finally spurns Mitch and liberates herself from his dominance and degradation. As such, "aberrant male forms really look aberrant" in the novel (*Massachusetts Review*, Shange 687). Despite Mitch's efforts to control and manipulate her artistic expression, Sassafrass simultaneously frees herself from his oppression and achieves creative reconnection and artistic autonomy. Sassafrass's final break with Mitch satisfies the goddess's requirement that she abandon him in order to properly receive her blessing, the newborn baby. In addition to her Christian-based awareness cultivated throughout her childhood, following the visit from her artistic ancestor, Billie Holliday, Sassafrass's desire to "*create new altars/new praises*" symbolizes her cognizant acceptance of and participation in Christio-Conjure. The Christio-Conjure paradigm, as Sassafrass experiences it, functions as a form of

praxis. The discourse of Christio-Conjure serves as a powerful vehicle through which she transforms her life and becomes a priestess and, like Cypress, a “*crusader*” (109 original emphasis) dedicated to liberating women of the African diaspora from “*blues and sorry ways*” (81).

Cypress, the Dancer

Unlike Sassafrass who sings Christian spirituals, Cypress does not overtly display her Christian beliefs, yet in no way does she ever demonstrate a disavowal of the Christian faith instilled in her by Hilda Effania. In fact, like Lena in *Baby of the Family*, raised by a mother well-anchored in Christianity, Cypress cannot escape her Christian cultivation. While Sassafrass accesses Christio-Conjure through the art of weaving and through the creation of poetry and song, Cypress employs the medium of dance. Interestingly, Cypress’s ambition regarding dance is structured like the Christio-Conjure paradigm itself. That is, she draws upon both European and African dance traditions in the creation of a new convention that addresses the socio-emotional needs of the African American collective. Her objective is “to dance as good as white folks and find out the truth about colored people’s movements” (135). She wants to master the aesthetics of Western ballet and convert that into a unique form of black dance (Baker 190). With the syncretism of Christio-Conjure as a model, I read Cypress’s endeavor as an attempt to blend culturally disparate forms of dance. She struggles with issues of artistic form and rejects the ideology of the dominant culture, which devalues the black appropriation of dance. For Cypress, dance is “*how we remember what cannot be said / that’s why white folks say it ain’t got no form*” (Shange 168 original emphasis). Art, then, like spirituality in the text, possesses political agency; Cypress delineates the meaning/function of dance

and its therapeutic role as a recording device for the unspeakable historical horrors experienced by African Americans.

Like Sassafrass, Cypress too is physically displaced, yet she never loses an awareness, appreciation, and respect for various forms of black culture, e.g., language, art, religion, etc. In her San Francisco home, she keeps an altar for the Orishas, Yoruba deities (Teish 56). She also creates “hieroglyphs in needlepoint to ease her mind and soothe her ancestors” (Shange 179). Moreover, honoring the Haitian Voodoo goddess of love, Cypress subscribes to the Erzulie Freida philosophy of love: attention from a variety of lovers is better than attention from one. As Teish explains, Erzulie is the “sacred harlot, beauty, love, sensuality, Queen of the performing arts,” she is “the African Venus—Afrodite!” (121). Making the connection between Cypress and Erzulie clear, the narrator references Cypress as the embodiment of the Haitian black goddess of love (Shange 165).

In light of her woman-centered proclivity, in New York Cypress sees Idrina, an ex-lover, and they share a brief sexual encounter during which Cypress undergoes a process of self-evaluation and re-creation. Prior to her impending Christio-Conjure transformation, Cypress’s lesbian encounter with Idrina serves as a catalyst for the development of a broader, more inclusive human vision, as she dreams of social transformation. The physical aspect of her vision features her body, blood, and muscle formed as a weapon of protection, while psychologically her vision reveals her will to change the world. In her vision, Cypress honors the martriarchal element of Christio-Conjure by assuming personal responsibility for the diasporic collective, those “of her own blood” (208).

While in New York, Cypress remains physically disjointed from her roots and the “*notion of [southern] aesthetics*” (93 original emphasis). But, following her transformative vision, she is now prepared to accept men into “her woman space” (141). While visiting a tavern, she hears Leroy’s music and instantly feels connected to “home,” her southern roots in Charleston. As she absorbs the sound of the music, she recalls her ability to dance, and her dancing produces emotional exhilaration as she journeys toward psychological liberation. Cypress’s entire essence is, in fact, associated with dance. After their tavern reunion, Cypress and Leroy begin dating, and in vividly lyrical terms, their lovemaking is described as a sensual dance:

*the original aboriginal dance of all time / challenge the
contradiction of perfected pirouette with the sly knowin of
hips that do-right / stretch till all the stars n sands of all
our lands abandoned / mingle in the wet heat / sweat and
grow warm / must be she the original aboriginal dancin
girl.* (158 original emphasis)

As the “*aboriginal dancin girl*,” Cypress also channels the energy of her ancestors; “her dance, like her people before her, [is] adapted to the contours of her new land. She choreograph[s] for the wilderness”(196) and dances to achieve emotional and spiritual rebirth and renewal for herself and others. Employing her body and spirit as a vessel, she commits herself to nurturing and inspiring transformation in others and “decide[s] to dance for the Civil Rights Movement” (LeSeur 176). By linking herself with historical dance troops and ancient African dance societies as well as with her modern viewing audience, she bridges past and present generations. Not only does she link generations, but she also connects cultural ideologies, employing an artistic variation of Christio-Conjure through her dance.

Although Cypress enters into a heterosexual union, she does not abandon the Christio-Conjure precept of the matriarch, for she still dreams (literally and figuratively) of black women's solidarity. The notion of matriarchy is an intrinsic element in the Christio-Conjure paradigm, embodied in Hurston's anthropological presentation of the Nanas in *Tell My Horse*. As well, it is a recurring theme throughout *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, which features "Mama was there" (Shange 225) as its closing phrase. But for Cypress, the matrilineal terms *Mama* and *Mother* are not synonymous. On the contrary, the concept of *Mama*—i.e. Hilda Effania—carries clearly Christian connotations, while the concept of *Mother*—i.e. matriarch—is associated with Conjure. The notions of *Mama* and *Mother*, though distinctly different—like the Christian and Conjure traditions they represent—are equally powerful; Cypress honors and reveres both, as she honors and reveres the blended tenets of Christianity and Conjure. As Cypress completes her Christio-Conjure transformation, she agrees to marry Leroy in her "mama's house" (211), metaphorically returning to her Christian roots. Encouraging Cypress's participation in the national tour, which symbolizes her community activism affected through dance, Hilda Effania notes, "the Lord will look kindly on the benefits you're going to do for Negro Christians; bless your souls, for taking time from a full season for the race. I'm mighty proud" (209). Cypress assumes the role of artistic Christio-Conjure woman as she dances for human justice.

Indigo, the Midwife

Like Sassafrass and Cypress who administer healing through art, Indigo too promotes healing through the medium of music. When she is a young girl, Uncle John gives her a "talking" fiddle and explains the origins of Christio-Conjure among African

Americans. He describes how the slave-owning class of Americans “took off wit [African] spirits left us wit they Son” (27). Moreover, he notes the fiddle’s unique function: “the fiddle be callin’ our gods what left us [. . .] talkin’ wit the unreal” (27). Captivated by Uncle John’s narrative, Indigo graciously accepts his talking fiddle. When she is threatened by two young boys, members of the Junior Geechee Captains, instead of fleeing, she stands before them and chants, “falcon come in this fiddle. Leopard come in this fiddle. I’m on the prey. I’m on the prey” (37). Here, Indigo demonstrates her ability to invoke spirits for self-protection, calling upon the powers of guardian spirits, or loa (Strandess 15). The boys are impressed by Indigo’s lack of intimidation and initiate her into their club. By joining the Geechees, Indigo symbolically connects with the history of her father, born on the Sea Islands.

While Indigo communes with nature and the “unreal” via her fiddle, she also disperses healing through the instrument. As an extension of her curative power, in her hands her fiddle is literally transformed into an instrument of healing. Indigo’s “sound is a spiritual bridgework akin” to “voodoo,” and it is a “connective between the everyday life of Charleston and ‘unreal’ repositories of ancestral voices, spells, and curative wisdom” (Baker 177-78). By intensely focusing on her audience (individual or group), Indigo intimately connects with them; for those with weary and fatigued souls, she proffers hope and revitalization.

Functioning as a healing force throughout the text, Indigo, like her sisters, employs all of her resources for the purposes of healing and/or protection. As the novel opens, readers are introduced to Indigo’s enchanted world, saturated with different aspects of Christio-Conjure including female empowerment and spirit contact:

where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs, and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits. Indigo seldom spoke. There was a moon in her mouth [. . .]. Sometimes [. . .] Indigo excused herself—her dolls were calling for her [. . .]. There wasn't enough for Indigo in the world she'd been born to, so she made up what she needed.

Access to the moon.

The power to heal.

Daily visits with the spirits. (Shange 3-5)

As the passage suggests, Indigo assumes the role of Christio-Conjure woman by creating rituals designed to promote a healthy black existence in a Western-based culture. Through her rituals, Indigo is linked to the moon and its mysterious astrological powers; she, in fact, creates ritualistic journeys to the moon. Additionally, she creates dolls who speak to her, symbolizing “her latent potential for becoming a mid-wife” (Strandness 14) in the tradition of Aunt Haydee, archetypal Christio-Conjure character.

Like her sisters, Indigo's vision of the world is informed by Christio-Conjure, and her experiences are saturated with ritualistic activity. When Indigo experiences her first menstrual cycle, Sister Mary Louise contextualizes the event as a blessing from God and instructs Indigo to take a rose bath. She explains that the bath will simulate Indigo's presence in a garden. Metaphorically, Sister Mary Louise's ritual re-establishes women's place in Eden, and revokes Eve's curse through the celebration of Indigo's maturation. Baker suggests that the “curse” of Eve is literally washed and spoken away by Sister Mary Louise (174). For Indigo, the beginning of her menstruation is indeed a moment “filled with grace” (Shange 19). While she participates in Sister Mary Louise's ritualistic rite of passage, honoring her new potential to create children and other forms of symbolic

beauty, as an emerging Christio-Conjure woman, she also acknowledges her ability to nurture and heal. Sister Mary Louise conducts Indigo's ritualistic indoctrination into Christio-Conjure, and her mentoring role in the novel marks her as an archetypal Christio-Conjure character. Moreover, Sister Mary Louise's mentoring relationship with Indigo foreshadows Indigo's future relationship with Aunt Haydee.

Although a pre-teen, Indigo is portrayed as wise and insightful, for "Shange [blurs] the line between reality and a child's imagination to illustrate that Indigo's wisdom goes far beyond her years" (LeSuer 170). Her mother is lucidly aware of her exceptional abilities and recognizes "this last one made more sense out of the world than either of the other two" (Shange 64). Similar to Lena in *Baby of the Family*, Indigo perplexes her mother. Unable to conceptualize the blended ideology of Christio-Conjure, Hilda Effania erroneously believes Indigo's uncanny behavior "has nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing at all [. . .]. She's got too much South in her" (4), i.e., too much Conjure influence. In black women's fiction, the American South is often depicted as a fecund setting permeating with Christio-Conjure ideology and activity, and all three title characters in Shange's novel are "steeped in the South and southern culture" (LeSeur 173). Indigo, like Sassafrass and Cypress, is physically displaced outside of Charleston, but unlike them, with too much of the "South in her," she remains physically situated in the South on Difuskie Island, the site of her ancestral home where her father was raised.

On the island, Aunt Haydee is a Gullah midwife similar to the title character in Naylor's *Mama Day*. Like Uncle John, Aunt Haydee functions within a dual frame of cultural reference. While she espouses fundamental Christian sentiments, she also invokes the aid of cultural ancestors, like the island legend *Blue Sunday* who assists her

with newborn deliveries. According to island folklore, *Blue Sunday* is an invincible slave woman who, unlike many female victims of slavery, manages to spurn unwanted sexual advances. When Master Fitzhugh attempts to rape her, she transforms into a crocodile and he loses a leg. Thereafter, she is never again seen by white people.¹² Black island women, however, often hear her soothing songs when in labor. As Aunt Haydee's assistant, Indigo's fiddling mimics *Blue Sunday's* singing; she connects with the women in the community to ease pain and foster healing.

The bond Indigo shares with Aunt Haydee is indestructible, like the bond they form with the women they serve. Indigo

concentrated on learning what Aunt Haydee knew. Giving birth, curing women folks and their loved ones. At first Aunt Haydee only allowed Indigo to play her fiddle to soothe the women in labor, but soon the mothers, the children sought Indigo for relief from elusive disquiet, hungers of the soul. Aunt Haydee was no fool. She watched Indigo playing the fiddle one evening as the tide came in. It'd been a long time since a colored woman on Difuskie moved the sea. Some say it was back in slavery time. *Blue Sunday*, that was her name [. . .] (Shange 222)

While clearly Indigo's connection to *Blue Sunday*, the island icon, bears cultural significance, it is through her association with Aunt Haydee that she inherits the responsibility of island griot. When Aunt Haydee dies, her role in the novel as an archetypal Christio-Conjure character is highlighted as she goes "to Our Lord on a melody only Indigo or *Blue Sunday* could know" (223). In order to call upon Aunt Haydee's loa¹³ for future guidance, Indigo ritualistically preserves her cremated ashes.

After Aunt Haydee's death, Indigo realizes that Difuskie Island is now her home. Yet her temporary return to Charleston is imperative, since Sassafrass is coming home to

have a baby. As she prepares to leave the island, she holds the jar of Aunt Haydee's ashes in her arms, and an island myth arises:

somebody said that the day Indigo left Difuskie, 2,000 *Blue Sundays* came out dancing [. . .] drinking moonshine, & showing their legs. Indigo never denied this, but she kept a drawer fulla silk stockings that had not a run, & she'd never been one to miss a dance, when the aqua blue men strode up from the sea, the slaves who were ourselves. (224)

This neo-legend/folktale, featuring Indigo as subject rather than in her usual role as narrator/griot, contains the recurring theme of ancestral reverence. Prior to her departure from Difuskie, Indigo communes with a collective group of once enslaved ancestors. This passage reinscribes the significance of spirit contact and ancestral reverence in Christio-Conjure. Following in the tradition of Aunt Haydee—a Nana figure as defined by Hurston in *Tell My Horse*—Indigo relates to various forms of physical and spiritual life: she connects with the previous generation (the spirit of Aunt Haydee), the current generation (the pregnant women she serves), and the future generation (newborns she delivers). Employing Christio-Conjure in her role as midwife, Indigo serves the unique spiritual needs of her island community and simultaneously pays homage to the esteemed, but historically displaced, black lay midwife of the American South.

Contemporary Christio-Conjure Activists

Indigo, Sassafrass, and Cypress transform themselves by subscribing to “a particular interest from which [they derive] power, be that interest music, dancing, or weaving cloth” (LeSuer 167). All three protagonists function as quintessential contemporary Christio-Conjure characters. Discussing the conflated heritage of African American culture, Chezia Thompson-Cager contends that “understanding the cultural legacy of Europe is only part of deciphering an Afro-centric world view” (37). Clearly,

the other “part of deciphering an Afro-centric world view” is recognizing African cultural influence and contribution. The afrofemcentric perspective features black women’s issues, agendas, histories, and legacies as the center of discussion and analysis. Shange explains the woman-centered approach she employs in her art:

i try to deal with black situations and i deal with the lives i
am most familiar with / which are women’s lives / through
women’s lives you can see the whole world. we raised all
these people. these people pass by us from birth til death.
If you look at a woman’s life / you can get an incredible
panorama. (“Live From St. Louis” 114)

Shange consciously privileges black women’s existence, which in history and literature has often been devalued, ignored, excluded, and erased. However, within the matrix of African American women’s writing, Shange’s novel functions as a cultural looking-glass. Furthermore, Hilda Effania and Indigo share

a special mother-daughter bonding, and we suspect that the
two older daughters have had the same experience and
teaching about life and black woman’s history from her.
Ultimately, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo are wise
women. Like their mother, they find out how to live and
how to express themselves in a nice/mean world. (LeSeur
174)

In the end, the three sisters return home to Hilda Effania, signifying a return to Christianity but, by no means, suggesting a rejection of Conjure. Although Hilda Effania is unwavering in her Christian principles, she learns to respect the diverse beliefs her daughters have independently developed. She explains to Cypress, for example, “*Maybe this holiday, Kwanza, is not as bad as I thought [. . .] as long as it’s a religious ceremony with feasts and gifts like Christmas, I guess it’ll be okay*” (Shange 132 original emphasis). As well, when Sassafrass decides to pursue initiation as a West African high priestess, Hilda Effania expresses her unconditional love and acceptance, while she simultaneously

maintains a Christian posture. She affectionately and supportively says, “sweetheart, whoever you are is all we have & I swear for Jesus, you my child” (225).

The closing scene features Hilda Effania and her three daughters, with her first grandchild literally en route. Indigo, as midwife, coaches Sassafrass through the birth of her child. The family has come full circle and is no longer dispersed across space. The daughters return home to usher in a new generation, and in order to continue the narrative of their lives, it is imperative that “Mama [is] there” (225). Thus, the novel, based upon the tenets of matrilineage, represents a body of black women’s writing which—responding to Hurston and Teish’s work—features black women tapping their cultural heritage and constructing their female futures. Shange “has created a new medium for expression. This medium is magical in quality and distinctly feminine” (LeSeur 170). In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* she has produced a novel that speaks to and illuminates struggles, setbacks, and accomplishments experienced by *sistahs*—both biological and diasporic. Incorporating aspects of Christio-Conjure in her work, as a literary Christio-Conjure woman, Shange, like her protagonists, is transformed into an activist through her art, which is shaped by the dual frame of reference and conflated spiritual heritage that is African American culture.

CHAPTER 6: CHRISTIO-CONJURE ROMANCE AND MAGIC

Overview: Naylor's Holy Trinity

Like Shange in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Gloria Naylor, in *Mama Day*, crafts a narrative imbued with Gullah and Christio-Conjure traditions.¹ Naylor is a contemporary African American writer known for characters who “are free to determine the course of their lives, building upon self-actualizing tradition” (Valade 271). Like Rhodes, Ansa, Bambara, and Shange, Naylor employs Christio-Conjure in her novel to accentuate the significance of contemporary and historical bonds between black women. *Mama Day* features Cocoa (Ophelia) and George, a newly married couple, as well as Cocoa’s grandmother and great-aunt, Abigail and Mama Day (Miranda). While Cocoa and George reside in New York City, Mama Day and Abigail live in Willow Springs where they raised Cocoa. As a fictional island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, the inhabitants of Willow Springs are Gullah,² products of a sea island culture lucidly infused with Christio-Conjure.

Cocoa, Mama Day, and Abigail are direct descendants of Sapphira Wade, the island’s original matriarch; of all the island inhabitants, they are the most closely connected to her legacy. The two sisters, Mama Day and Abigail, are the great-granddaughters of Sapphira, the granddaughters of Sapphira’s seventh son (Jonah Day), and daughters of Jonah’s seventh son (John-Paul Day).³ The “seventh son” motif within Conjure is especially pervasive because “Conjure doctors often claimed to be a seventh son (of a seventh son)” (Brown 8). Yet the “seventh son” motif is reappropriated in *Mama Day*, casting the title character as a “Conjure doctor” and Sapphira as a “true conjure woman” (Naylor 3). Christianity, however, tempers aspects of Conjure in the

novel, and vice versa. In *Mama Day*, Naylor transforms the Christian notion of the “Father, Son, and holy Spirit” into the Christio-Conjure holy trinity featuring Mama Day, George, and Sapphira, respectively as the “Mother, Son, and holy Spirit.” Many of the blended spiritual elements Hurston and Teish outline in their work appear in *Mama Day*. In particular, this novel is marked as a Christio-Conjure text by its afrocentrism, ancestor reverence, natural healing, human manipulation of nature, goddess worship, worship of the Christian God, participation in Christian faith through reading the Bible, expression of Christian faith through prayer, and demonstration of Christian faith through song.

Similar to the characters in *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, the characters in *Mama Day* demonstrate their Christio-Conjure orientation in different ways. Mama Day and Sapphira believe in *and* practice Christio-Conjure, while George, subsequent to his ideological transformation, accepts/believes in certain elements of Christio-Conjure but never truly practices it. Within the fictional space of Willow Springs, Christio-Conjure functions as a discourse, a body of “knowledge” or more specifically, as a “relatively well-bounded area of social knowledge” (McHoul and Grace 26-31). As a discourse, Christio-Conjure determines the manner in which the inhabitants of the island shape and define their existence; it is the funnel through which they interpret the world and create change by reversing oppressive racio-gendered systems of power. In the novel, Christio-Conjure governs more than the spiritual practices of Willow Springs, it also informs local social custom, medical practice, scientific research and investigation, criminal justice, and the documentation of the island’s history.

While Mama Day, George, and Sapphira form the Christio-Conjure holy trinity, Cocoa serves as the point of intersection between the members of the trinity, for she is the character with whom each member is linked either by matrimony or blood. With an ethos grounded in the legacy of Sapphira and Mama Day, Cocoa finds it extremely difficult to “enact the conjuror role of Sapphira Wade’s heir” (Simon 17) while away from her sea island home in the urban setting of New York City. In New York, she fears possible amalgamation with Western/white culture and is determined to maintain the black cultural values engrained in her on her island home. Following an unimpressive first date with George, who has hired her as a clerk in his engineering firm, Cocoa contemplates his request for a second date thinking, “Surely he jests” (Naylor 64). Cocoa finds her practically unconscious use of Shakespeare disconcerting and wonders to what extent she has assimilated into Euro-American culture while away from Willow Springs.

Like many of her transplanted African ancestors who struggled to keep their cultural identity intact, Cocoa follows their example by rejecting the Western literary ideal set by Shakespeare. She believes that Shakespeare does not affirm her black cultural heritage: “Shakespeare didn’t have a bit of soul—I don’t care if he did write about Othello and Cleopatra, and some slave on a Caribbean island” (64). Cocoa critiques Shakespeare and draws the conclusion that he was not in touch with black culture. Judging Shakespeare’s cultural contribution according to her personal standards, solidly rooted in Gullah, she summarily dismisses the significance of his work. In this sense, Cocoa succeeds in metaphorically “enact[ing] the conjuror role of Sapphira Wade’s heir” (Simon 17), by performing the parallel task of dismantling white, male patriarchy. Although Cocoa, as an adult, displays an unwavering Christio-Conjure frame of reference, during her childhood in

Willow Springs, non-believers challenge her faith in the spiritual construct. She tells George, as

a little girl I had been taught that you don't waste your time telling people things you know they won't believe. I had seen Mama Day do a lot of things out at the other place, and when I told the kids at school they called me a liar. I got into some awful fights that way, coming home crying [. . .]. But if I could just bring them here and let them *see*, I'd say. Folks see what they want to see, she told me. And for them to see what's really happening here, they gotta be ready to believe. (Naylor 97 original emphasis)

With faith/belief as a central theme in the novel, this exchange foreshadows George's impending struggle and metamorphosis as an island outsider and Christio-Conjure non-believer.

Mama Day functions as the vessel through which George transforms within Christio-Conjure. Like Nurse Bloom in *Baby of the Family*, Mama Day is the communal mother of everyone on the island. Mama Day and Abigail, however, function as Cocoa's combined surrogate mother, and "together they [are] the perfect mother" (58). Mama Day and Abigail are so unified in their role as Cocoa's mother that although they bicker about what information to include and exclude in their correspondence to Cocoa, it never occurs to them to write her separately. In fact, the novel suggests that Abigail and Mama Day are absolutely inseparable. Their uncanny affinity dates back to their childhood when they "[n]estled under the quilt [. . .] four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat" (36). But their childhood is saturated with emotional pain and anguish, largely due to the death of their younger sister, Peace, who "was not supposed to die in their home;" there was Miranda and Abigail but "there will be no Peace" (166). Because their mother goes mad as a consequence of her youngest daughter's death, literally and figuratively there is

“no Peace” in their home (at least not until George symbolically restores it via his self-sacrifice).

Thus, Cocoa is not only heir to the great, liberating legacy of the island matriarch, Sapphira, but she is also heir to a convoluted and burdensome legacy of suffering and heartache. While multiple passages in the text are imbued with the grandnarrative of suffering,⁴ the suffering is not restricted to individual characters; it includes the physical space of Willow Springs, which has suffered from “malaria. Union soldiers. Sandy soil. Two big depressions. Hurricanes. Not to mention these new real estate developers” (4) who wish to exploit the island’s geography and natural resources. Despite various forms of suffering, nevertheless, the community is grateful that “thanks to the conjuring of Sapphira Wade” (5) they own the island. Sapphira’s conjuring in this instance is merely one example of how Christio-Conjure, throughout the novel, functions as a catalyst of emotional recovery, psychological healing, and spiritual triumph.

As owners of the island, the inhabitants of Willow Springs create a world that pays homage to their faith in Christio-Conjure. This is clearly illustrated in the Candle Walk ritual:

every December 22 folks take to the road [. . .]. Since everybody said “Come my way,” [. . .] them that needed it got it quiet like [. . .] it all got accepted with the [. . .] lift of the candle [. . .]. In [Miranda’s] young days [. . .]. [a]fter [. . .] leaving what was needed [. . .]. They’d hum some [. . .] ancient song [. . .]. They’d all raise them candles [. . .]. John-Paul says in his time [. . .] people kinda worshiped his grandmother, a slave woman who took her freedom [. . .]. Folks [. . .] would line the main road with candles [. . .] and slivers of ginger to help her spirit along [. . .] (108-111)

In this passage, Sapphira is characterized in the same context as Rachel in *Baby of the Family*, as another slave woman who “took her freedom.” Also in this passage, the narrator

reveals that outsiders in Willow Springs often presume Candle Walk is solely a Christmas/Christian celebration, while it actually epitomizes the blended tradition of Christio-Conjure. Held on December twenty-second, Candle Walk draws upon the Christian holiday of Christmas, during which gifts are exchanged in the spirit of giving and in celebration of the birth of Christ. Additionally, Candle Walk is a Christio-Conjure celebration that incorporates the practice of ancestral reverence. The holiday honors the legacy of Sapphira, worshiped by previous generations as a goddess. Candle Walk reinscribes her symbolic position in the novel as the holy Spirit. With customs and traditions such as Candle Walk codified over time in Willow Springs, the island operates as a cultural metaphor of Christio-Conjure, with the inhabitants employing different facets of the paradigm as resistance against social oppression.

The presence of Christio-Conjure on the island symbolizes the community's will to construct and maintain its unique cultural identity. Within the isolated space of Willow Springs, the inhabitants refuse to abandon their folk culture and succumb to external forces and/or cultural influences from the mainland like Western technology. As a hurricane approaches, for example, Mama Day, Abigail, and all of Willow Springs prepare for the disaster. Mama Day calls Abigail to warn her of the impending storm, and during their telephone conversation, the novel's Christio-Conjure framework is further exposed. Simultaneously discussing "blasphemy," "the Scriptures," and fitting punishments administered by God (228-29), Mama Day also suggests that "the signs don't lie" (228). Like Miss Lizzie, her position here speaks to the Christio-Conjure method of decoding natural "signs" as a procedure for predicting future events. Mama Day believes that the natural reactions of animals furnish far more rapid and dependable

feedback than scientific meters and graphs. Mama Day “has authority because she lives in a community where science is an act of faith with even less power than communal faith acts” (Lee 65). Like Nurse Bloom in *Baby of the Family*, Mama Day “undermin[es] scientific knowledge by emphasizing [a] subjugated form of knowledge” (65). Contrary to *The Salt Eaters*, in *Mama Day*, Western technology as an external force on the island is rendered impotent and worthless.

Instead of focusing on technology, the inhabitants of Willow Springs focus on faith and spirituality. Cocoa’s grandmother, Abigail, for example, turns to her faith when distressed. Cocoa remembers that her grandmother “sang spirituals all morning” and “started going to the Cross and waiting by the Jordan and then on to six choruses of ‘No Ways Tired’” (Naylor 275). Likewise, while Cocoa is deathly ill, George recalls Abigail standing at the sink repeating, “Oh, I don’t feel no ways tired” and confessing a Christian faith that God had not “brought me this far to leave me” (288). Abigail is faithful and prayerful as she implores God’s divine intervention on Cocoa’s behalf. Both Abigail and Mama Day employ their faith during moments of crisis:

Abigail is reading her Bible in the light of the burning fire [. . .]. Miranda can’t get rid of the heaviness way down in her center [. . .]. And it ain’t them winds building up outside [. . .]. Naw, this was other trouble [. . .]. Too much else going on around her to call up what it might be [. . .]. *I cried unto God with my voice* [. . .]. *Thou holdest mine eyes waking; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times* [. . .]. *I call to remembrance my song in the night. I commune with mine own heart* [. . .]. *And my spirit made diligent search* [. . .]. *I will meditate also all thy work, and talk of thy doings* [. . .]. *O God, the waters saw thee; they were afraid. The depths also were troubled. The clouds poured out water. The skies sent out a sound. Thine arrows also went abroad. The voice of thy thunder was in heaven. The lightnings lightened the world. The earth trembled and*

shook [. . .]. *Thy way was in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known* [. . .] the prayers went up in Willow Springs to be spared from what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name. (249-51 original emphasis)

Christio-Conjure imagery fills the above passage, including a reference to the Christian Bible, calling upon the Christian God, and offering prayers to a Woman who “has no name.” Essentially, this passage demonstrates how the inhabitants of Willow Springs interpret the magnitude of natural disaster within a woman-centered context. As a reflection of its female creator, the impending storm represents a potent and compelling force and serves as a metaphor for the power wielded by women throughout the novel. Though in *Mama Day* the patriarchal holy trinity is transformed, Naylor does not utterly demasculinize the Christian version of the trinity. Instead, she balances it by including the male figure of George as the holy Son. Like the Christian holy trinity, all three characters (Mama Day as holy Mother, George as holy Son, and Sapphira as holy Spirit) form a matrix for Cocoa’s literal and spiritual sustenance and salvation.

Sapphira, as Holy Spirit

With predecessors like Sapphira, a “true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay” (3), in the Sea Islands, black “[Christio]-Conjure women⁵ dominated the cultural scene” (Chireau 54). Sapphira could “grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot” (3). As a “true conjure woman” Sapphira is endowed with superhuman capabilities, including her ability to manipulate the forces of nature. As well, she functions in the traditional role of communal healer with the aid of “her medicine pot,” serving “*on occasion in the capacity of midwife⁶ and nurse*” (2 original emphasis).

Sapphira is the most complex character in *Mama Day*. Functioning as the matriarchal deity of Willow Springs, her presence informs the entire context of the novel and encapsulates multiple themes of Christio-Conjure.

Sapphira is the embodiment of the island's history. According to local legend, Willow Springs was once owned by a Norwegian, Bascombe Wade, who “fell under the spell of a woman he owned” (206).⁷ The character of the island is eternally shaped by the connection between Bascombe and Sapphira and reflects the conflated heritage upon which the island community is established:

It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies [. . .] [Sapphira] married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons [. . .] put a dagger through his kidney and escaped the hangman's noose [. . .] persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons—by person or persons unknown. Mixing it all together [. . .] you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade [. . .] the deeds to our land [. . .] and seven sons (ain't Miss Abigail and Mama Day the granddaughters of that seventh boy?) (3)

In Willow Springs, patriarchy is displaced with matriarchy, as Sapphira leads the community. By convincing Bascombe to deed the land to his slaves, Sapphira enacts independence for the black community of Willow Springs.

Edith Deen explains that in early Hebrew records the name Sapphira means “a beautiful woman” who “tames her savage mate” (214). With the atrocities of the American slave system historically documented, it is easy to envision slave-holding Bascombe as “savage.” However, in Naylor's narrative, Sapphira—having perhaps stabbed or poisoned Bascombe—is depicted as ruthless and malicious⁸ in her struggle against oppression. Despite her enslavement, she engineers and executes a plan for her

sons to live “as free men” (150). Moreover, she elects her family’s surname: “God rested on the seventh day” and “she would too” (150), hence her descendants’ last name—Day. Sapphira further subverts patriarchal tradition by neither allowing her family’s surname to be assigned by a white, male plantation owner, nor permitting it to be delegated by the legal process of a free-will marriage. In the act of self-naming she defines herself and establishes her legal status as a free, autonomous black woman.

As the founding matriarch of Willow Springs, she is revered and deified by successive generations of islanders as a goddess. While the element of goddess worship in *Christio-Conjure* largely the result of Conjure influence, Christianity too contains a history of goddess worship—albeit trampled and discarded. According to Jean Shinoda Bolen, “there appears to be a goddess in the Old Testament’s Book of Proverbs [. . .]. *Chokmah* in Hebrew, became *Sophia* in Greek, and then the abstract and neuter word ‘wisdom’ in English” (37 original emphasis). Sophia “appears in almost every culture and society” distinguishable by “the fact that she is a Black Goddess” (C. Matthews 11). In addition, “Black Virgin Statues” of Sophia are found throughout Europe with “the question of their blackness” at times “rationalized as [. . .] Negroid origin” (194). In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the Black Virgin, Sophia, is demoted from goddess status and reinterpreted as the personification of wisdom. Speaking as wisdom, she delineates her distinctive relationship with God: “*The Lord created me [. . .] before all else [. . .]. When he set the heavens in their place I was there [. . .] when he knit together the earth’s foundations [. . .]. I was at his side [. . .] I was his darling and delight, rejoicing with him always [. . .] in his inhabited world and delighting in mankind*” (*The Holy Bible*, RSV, Proverbs 8:14, 8:22-31, 9:1 original emphasis). Since

Judeo-Christian tradition “officially maintains that there is but one God,” Sophia could not be reconciled with Christian monotheism, so scribes of the religious doctrine opted “to deny the existence of feminine divinity⁹ and consider references to her as poetic expression[s]” (Bolen 38) of wisdom. However, black female divinity is reclaimed in *Mama Day*.

Sapphira not only assumes the secular role of community leader in Willow Springs, but like the biblical character Sophia, she also leads the community spiritually in partnership with the Christian Lord:

the island got spit out of the mouth of God, and when it fell to earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. “Leave ’em here, Lord,” she said. “I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light [. . .]” (Naylor 108)

The people of Willow Springs carry lit candles during the Candle Walk celebration, symbolizing the light with which their Moses¹⁰ figure, Sapphira, led them out of the darkness of slavery into the light of freedom. In *Mama Day*, Sapphira is like Moses, the “greatest [biblical] conjurer” (*Mules and Men*, Hurston 287). Sapphira’s extraordinary achievements coupled with her superhuman capabilities contribute to her elevated status as Willow Springs’ quintessential “holy Spirit.”

Mama Day, Holy Mother

Because her mother functioned strictly in a titular capacity after the death of her youngest daughter, Peace, Mama Day, is a self-sacrificing character forced into the role of family caretaker. For Mama Day there was “no time to be young,” being there “for mama and child. For sister and child,” they needed “Little Mama. Gifted hands” that

“caught babies¹¹ til it was too late to have [her] own [. . .] Lord, can’t count ’em—into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now”¹² (Naylor 88-9). Mama Day functions in the classic role of matriarchal midwife, exemplified by Nurse Bloom in *Baby of the Family*, Old Wife, Minnie, and Sophie in *The Salt Eaters*, and Aunt Haydee in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. Like her ancestor, Sapphira, as “everybody’s mama,” Mama Day is the community midwife and medical expert, and she symbolically serves as the “giver of life” for the inhabitants of the island. Indeed, “when we turn to the black American conjurer we find not only a magician” but also a “doctor” (Smith 5). Mama Day’s role as medicine woman illustrates the historical relationship between medicine and religion in African American culture, for despite the erosion of several indigenous African religious traditions, some influences remained; “[t]he chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine [Wo]Man¹³ [. . .] healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong” (DuBois 144). Without question, as Willow Springs’ medicine woman, Mama Day serves in the capacities outlined here.

Although medically untrained and uncertified, like historical black lay midwives, Mama Day is exceptionally skilled and highly sought-after. As a midwife, she manifests the natural healing component of Christio-Conjure. In fact, Dr. Smithfield from the mainland—trained at Meharry medical school like Dr. Williams in *Baby of the Family* and Dr. Meadows in *The Salt Eaters*—“couldn’t be expected to believe” the “things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her” (Naylor 84). Unlike the traditional medical doctor, Mama Day—and the entire community—considers her medical skill and expertise a “gift” (88) or calling from God

rather than a trade/profession acquired through academic training. Unlike traditional medical doctors, she shares her gift communally without financial compensation.

Mama Day's role as communal midwife is particularly apparent in the passages that feature her helping Bernice cure her infertility. After using fertility drugs prescribed by Dr. Smithfield, Bernice and her husband, Ambush, are still unable to conceive and consequently seek Mama Day's medical counsel. Ambush says, "[n]o offense, Mama Day, but I told her since she got them pills from Dr. Smithfield we oughta call him, but she said no—go get you" (72). Bernice's sentiments reinforce Mama Day's elevated status on the island as a medical expert. Employing natural ingredients to cure Bernice's infertility, Mama Day instructs her: "[w]hen you take the vines from them gold seeds out into the garden, you're really taking the lifeline between you and the baby. And the way you watch that grow—round and full—the life will sure to be growing inside of you" (97).

The most significant aspect of Bernice's infertility dilemma hinges upon her belief/faith in the advice Mama Day offers, for according to Mama Day, "the mind is a funny thing" and "a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (96). As instructed, "Bernice quietly moves about the business of preparing for her miracle" (135), and she and Ambush are delighted with the birth of their newborn son, Chick. Since Chick's human existence is the result of Mama Day's medical acumen, her position in the Christio-Conjure trinity as the "giver of life" is further solidified.

Although the treatment of Christio-Conjure characters in contemporary black women's fiction is often presented in a positive—even glorified—light, through the interaction between Mama Day and Ruby, Naylor balances her narrative with both benevolent and malevolent renderings of Christio-Conjure. As with any source of power, Christio-Conjure can be used virtuously or be abused, and life in Willow Springs substantiates the traditional West African notion that “there was really no absolute evil” and that “both good and evil resided in everything. Nothing was so good that it could not cause inconvenience to someone; nothing was so bad that someone somewhere could not benefit from it” (Haskins 12-21). In *Mama Day*, Ruby clearly personifies an evil Christio-Conjure character, serving as a foil for Mama Day. Like Ruby who specializes in curses and hexes, evil Christio-Conjurers “gained and held their influence” by various methods “especially fear” and “were considered the source of most misfortunes” (“Believer,” Joyner 35). Ruby has earned a sinister reputation on the island, and when she becomes concerned that her love interest, Jr. Lee, is attracted to Cocoa, she employs spells to eliminate Cocoa as potential competition.

As Ruby's victim, Cocoa not only experiences a rapid decline in health, but, in addition, she almost dies. She says, “it was no illusion that the welts had left the surface of my skin,” they “had begun to crawl within my body” feeding on me, “the putrid odor of decaying matter that I could taste” and “smell with every breath” the “flecks of lining from my bladder left on the toilet tissue” (Naylor 287). As well, George notes: “you were asleep again,” and your face was still that “of a cadaver [. . .]. Your cheekbones pressing hard against the sunken flesh that was turning a sickly pale, the purplish black circles blending” with “your closed eyelashes. My throat tightened at the thickness and

beauty of those lashes, the one remaining feature that I could recognize” (288). Ruby’s plot to eliminate Cocoa as possible competition is quite effective. Mama Day, however, is stupefied by Ruby’s sheer gall and unmitigated malice toward Cocoa, who is entirely innocent of Ruby’s paranoid accusations.

In Willow Springs, the islanders “take care of their own, if there is a rare crime, there’s speedy judgment. And it ain’t like the law beyond the bridge that’s dished out according to likes and dislikes, and can change with the times” (79). Despite Ruby’s fear-inspiring reputation, she is no exception to Willow Springs’ code of conduct. Mama Day contemplates what kind of retaliation Ruby deserves and concludes that “Ruby don’t know me,” she “*can’t* know me or she wouldna done this” (265 original emphasis). Christio-Conjure as a “Gullah religion” serves “spiritual needs, but it also [builds] internal community regulation” (Washington 49), and, within the text, Mama Day is the dispenser of justice. Ruby sees Mama Day

coming up the main road and goes inside and bolts her door shut [. . .] Miranda thinks, that’s just where I want you [. . .]. “Are you in there, Ruby?” [. . .] three times is all that she’s required. That’ll be her defense at Judgment: Lord, I called out three times [. . .] she brings that cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house [. . .]. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She [. . .] strikes it [. . .] hard against the front door [. . .] and the winds don’t stir the circle of silvery powder [. . .] lightning is flashing in the clouds [. . .]. It hits Ruby’s house twice, and the second time the house explodes. (269-73)

This scene demonstrates balance within Christio-Conjure and the tempering of each individual spiritual tradition by the other. Mama Day simultaneously casts a Conjure spell while calling upon the Christian God. She manipulates nature and causes lightning

to strike Ruby's house, and both owner and property are destroyed. Mama Day acts with caution and deliberation, considering the religious/moral ramifications of her actions. She, in fact, considers her "defense at the Judgment" and gets "down on her knees to pray to the Father and the Son" (273). Although Mama Day destroys Ruby, the culprit of Cocoa's plight, nevertheless, Cocoa lingers on devastatingly ill. Despite Mama Day's power and resourcefulness, she does not over-estimate her ability to remedy the situation. She posits, "I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of" but "this time they ain't no good alone" (294). Just as God needed Jesus's sacrifice to save Christians, Mama Day needs George's help to save Cocoa.

George, Holy Son

George is raised in a homeless shelter for boys, abandoned as an infant by his mother, a teenaged prostitute. Like Christ, he is a man with a humble beginning. In the boys' home, George develops self-reliance and rational thinking: "there were only rules and facts [. . .] you grew up with absolutely no illusions about yourself or the world" (24-6). Yet when he meets Cocoa he senses "a confrontation with fate" (28). He and Cocoa subscribe to strikingly dissimilar worldviews; as an urbanite, George is faithful to Western perceptions of rational, logical, and analytical thought, while Cocoa's perceptions are rooted in spiritual aspects of faith and belief.

In Cocoa's hometown, George is introduced to a new and foreign way of "being" in the world. He describes Willow Springs as edenic, "more than pure, it was primal" (185). Despite his adoration, paradoxically, George feels a sense of physical and ideological displacement in "Naylor's problematized paradise" (Lee 130). As a visitor, the Christio-Conjure rituals practiced by Cocoa and her family mystify George. The significance of

these rituals becomes evident when Cocoa and Mama Day enter their family plot and place moss in their shoes, which allows them to communicate with their ancestral spirits. Cocoa is frustrated by George who queries, “what would happen if I didn’t? Why be a pain in the butt, George? Nothing would happen if you didn’t. But it shows respect. I was just asking—every tradition has some kind of background to it” (Naylor 217-18). Although the island customs are unfamiliar to George, he perceptively realizes that the moss ritual, like all customs, has evolved within a larger context of cultural meaning and significance.

Ironically, the moss ritual is a matter that greatly affects George and Cocoa’s relationship. In addition to ancestral reverence, spirit contact is also a part of the moss ritual. In a moment of reflection, Cocoa confesses to George that, “it would have been too much to ask for you to understand those whispers as we passed through my family plot. As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all [. . .] *you’ll break his heart*” (223-24 original emphasis). Grace, the spirit of Cocoa’s deceased mother, explains that she, like Sapphira, aimed to subvert gendered oppression:

I gave [. . .] [Cocoa] [. . .] my grandmother’s name, Ophelia. I did it out of vengeance. Let this be another one, I told God, who could break a man’s heart. Didn’t women suffer enough? [. . .] If I had known then what I was knowing all along, I would have named her something else. Sapphira. My grandmother only softly broke a heart. My great-grand mother tore one wide open. (151)

The moss ritual facilitates communication between Cocoa and her deceased ancestors who predict an unpromising outcome for George, and despite his role as cultural outsider, George’s interest in and curiosity about the ritual symbolically reinforces his prior premonition that Cocoa represents, for him, a confrontation with fate.

The exchange between Cocoa and her ancestors emphasizes the Christio-Conjure belief in the “mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one;” the “words of parents, for example, carry power when spoken to children: they cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis” (Mbiti 275-78). Likewise, “the mystical power of words” is apparent in George’s dream when he envisions himself drowning off the coast of the island. He sees “Mama Day leaning over the bridge” (Naylor 184). She instructs him in a “voice [that] came like thunder” to “Get Up and Walk” (184). Though angry that Mama Day does not rescue him, he gathers his strength and raises himself “in the middle of the sound” (184). Through the dream, George subconsciously begins to subscribe to the power of the spoken word. Preparing for his role in the Christio-Conjure trinity, in his dream George performs the Christ-like feat of walking on water. Heeding Mama Day’s command, he walks by faith and is motivated by the power of her resounding command.

Since Cocoa is victimized by Ruby’s evil conjuring, George, the rational thinker, is asked to believe in and act upon Mama Day’s metaphysical power as the only viable means of saving Cocoa’s life. Because Cocoa “tied up her mind and her flesh with George” (265), Mama Day posits that his intercession is essential to Cocoa’s recovery. He reminisces with Cocoa, recalling Mama Day’s abilities: “your great-aunt [. . .] made the cologne you were wearing. God bless her, because you filled the air with lavender every time you moved [. . .]. I’d never tasted mint that sweet and strong [. . .]. It was amazing what your great-aunt could do with herbs and plants” (105-6). The narrator outlines the natural methods Mama Day employs in creating healing remedies:

“differences in the leaves of trees, barks of trees, roots. The tonics she makes up, the poultices, the healing teas,” in “her hands she could make the medicine he uses for his heart” (207). Slowly, George is forced to accept the value of Mama Day’s folk wisdom, although it challenges his own Western analytical logic.

As Cocoa withers on her deathbed, a hurricane has destroyed the bridge to the mainland, severing access to and from Dr. Smithfield. Like the “local doctor [who] has to admit that her herbal cures are just as good as what he himself can accomplish with years of medical training” (Saunders 9), George must learn to value and respect Mama Day as a healer and living folk legend. His growing faith in Mama Day co-exists with his developing faith in God, and the magnitude of the storm forces George to reconcile his skepticism with the phenomenal force of the hurricane. He says, “the wind coming around the corners of that house was God. I hadn’t thought about God much before then [. . .]. I saw the Bible as a literary masterpiece, but literature all the same,” but “the winds coming around the corner of that tiny house on that tiny island was God” (Naylor 251-54).

The striking intensity of the storm causes him to acknowledge and declare his acceptance of and belief in the existence of God, which represents a pivotal moment in George’s impending ideological transformation. He must also accept Mama Day’s god-like powers, while he simultaneously struggles to “hold on to what was real” (291). Dr. Buzzard attempts to help George decipher his role in Cocoa’s salvation. He insists that George reappropriate his ideological position and transfer his unwavering belief in himself to an unwavering belief in Mama Day who “needs his hands in hers—so she can

connect up with all the believing that had gone before” so “together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over” (285).

As Cocoa’s condition worsens, George becomes desperate and finally seeks Mama Day’s assistance. In the back of her chicken coop, she tells George: “there’s an old red hen that’s setting her last batch of eggs. You gotta take this book and cane in there with you, search good in the back of her nest, and come straight back here with whatever you find” (295). Despite his anger and disgust for Mama Day’s “mumbo jumbo” (295), he musters enough *faith* to act upon her request and goes to the chicken coop as directed. However, he discovers that her request is more complex than it sounds. As he searches the chicken coop, he finds nothing recognizably significant. He finds only himself and his hands “covered with feathers, straw, manure, and blood” (301). As he departs the chicken coop, he thinks:

[a]ll this wasted effort when these were *my* hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go [. . .]. It was impossible to cross over, make it up those porch steps, and into your room. I did it [. . .]. That’s why I gripped your shoulder so tightly [. . .]. I didn’t feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace. (301-02 original emphasis)

George’s role as holy Son is illuminated as his broken body becomes the source of Cocoa’s ultimate salvation. George finally experiences the “confrontation with fate” (28) he sensed when he initially met Cocoa. As her ancestors predict, Cocoa “*break[s] his heart*” (224 original emphasis)—literally; George, who suffers from a heart condition, dies of heart failure.

Throughout the novel, the dialogue between Cocoa and George is actually between Cocoa and the spirit of George. The relationship they share throughout the text

transpires after his death; thus, the entire novel is a reflection piece. Through death, George discovers a lesson in faith: it is foolish and unwise to dismiss the inexplicable as impossible. As the novel closes, George's role as a Christio-Conjure character is complete. Significantly, he is the only male in the text accorded such status within the predominately afrofemcentric realm of Christio-Conjure. As a spirit, he listens to Mama Day with an open mind while she

holds her candle in the direction of the waters that carry his ashes: I can tell you now about this here night. You done opened that memory for us [. . .]. I can't tell you her name, 'cause it was never opened to me. That's a door for the child of Grace [Cocoa] to walk through. And how many, if any, of them sons were his? Well, that's also left for her to find. And you'll help her, won't you? [. . .] One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me. And there'll be another time—that I won't be here—when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you. (308)

Rather than separation in death, Mama Day ensures George's spiritual unification with Cocoa. His ultimate sacrifice not only enables him, but others in the text as well, to claim a sense of tranquility in a family that previously had "no Peace" (36). Since he is initially cast in the multi-dimensional role of man displaced geographically, ideologically, and sexually within the woman-centered, rural space of Willow Springs, these factors make George an unlikely candidate for Christio-Conjure, and as the quintessential non-believer, his conversion demonstrates the potency of the spiritual paradigm.

In order to save Cocoa, Mama Day must seek the aid of her ancestors by connecting "with all the believing that had gone before" (285). The effort to save Cocoa must be communal, an individual effort would fail miserably. Finally, Mama Day

observes in Cocoa “a face that’s been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of answers” (312). Cocoa’s recovery is not an individual healing, it is communal since Mama Day has connected with the spirits of various family members, identifying the hurt, pain, and disappointment throughout the generations of the Day family that represent the universal human experience of suffering and sorrow. The serenity that George offers only as a consequence of his death is a peace that permeates previous generations with whom Cocoa is connected via the discourse of Christio-Conjure. Securing his place in the Christio-Conjure trinity, George gives his life so that Cocoa may not only live but also attain peace and enlightenment. As well, George serves as spiritual guide for Cocoa to learn her “Genesis” in the words and deeds of Willow Springs’ mysterious original matriarch, Sapphira.

Restructuring the Christio-Conjure Holy Trinity

Like Ansa’s *Baby of the Family* which highlights Lena’s magical abilities, in *Mama Day*, Naylor intersects magic and Christio-Conjure. Luisah Teish, Christio-Conjure priestess, personifies Naylor’s notion of magic and its place within the framework of spiritual empowerment. Teish’s sense of magic involves manipulating nature and natural symbols to “manifest desired change in people and things” (207). She postulates that magic is a conscious and directed expenditure of energy, which aligns humans with nature and creates a space of dual existence. Magic, she says, “induces us to be fluid and solid at the same time” (244). This sense of magic epitomizes Christio-Conjure’s fusing of nature and spirituality into a cultural paradigm of faith.

Specifically in Sea Island culture, magic and spirituality are interconnected, for Gullah people took their physical and personal problems to local Christio-Conjurers, among whom no “feat” of “magic” was considered beyond their ability to perform

(“Believer,” Joyner 35). Examples of such magical feats include curing illness, killing enemies, or securing the love of another (34). In the novel, Mama Day employs Christio-Conjure to perform magical feats. She cures Bernice’s infertility with “magic seeds” (Naylor 96), conjures Ruby’s death, and secures George’s romantic interest in Cocoa with a lavender love potion mixed in dusting powder and cologne. Like these Christio-Conjure acts performed by Mama Day, Sapphira performs magically in the text too by turning “the moon into a slave, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and heal[ing] the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (3). Indeed, no “feat” of “magic” is considered beyond the Christio-Conjure abilities of the two textual matriarchs, Mama Day and Sapphira.

During the novel’s dénouement, the closing scene features Cocoa, Mama Day, and Abigail “bunched together, so it’s hard to say who’s holding who up [. . .]. It’s the three of them under two umbrellas with Cocoa in the middle [. . .]. Not much talk between ‘em, and the echoes of ‘Lead on with light’ from the passing figures in the dense night” (Naylor 307). In a dynamic twist, the closing scene of the novel offers the image of Cocoa, Mama Day, and Abigail restructuring the Christio-Conjure trinity disrupted by George’s death. Further emphasizing the theme of matriarchy, Cocoa and her two surrogate mothers form the black female holy trinity; they walk in a fortifying embrace as the survivors of bouts of natural disaster, physical malady, and generations of emotional distress. Worship of the female deity comes full-circle in the text, beginning with Sapphira, the family’s first traceable descendant and closing with Cocoa, the family’s youngest descendant, as part of a symbolic holy trinity.

Naylor relies on magic in the construction of her narrative. For her, the narrative's magic is complex and is manifested through acts of reading, falling in love, working with nature, and also through creative acts (Naylor qtd. in Perry 233). Naylor assigns women the particular purview of using magic to "create things" (233), linking her to Teish who defines magic as an art "by which we can create everything we need" (Teish 207). These elements of magic bespeak the discourse of Christio-Conjure and make it a useful and familiar tool for contemporary black women writers. As a literary Christio-Conjure woman, in *Mama Day* Naylor demonstrates the intrinsic cultural value of blended systems of belief in African American culture that characterize Christio-Conjure; in this novel, black life simply does not make sense when taken out of syncretized, communal contexts. Throughout *Mama Day*, Naylor subscribes to Christio-Conjure on multiple levels. In addition to employing it as a literary motif, she also performs a magical act during the creative process of producing the literary text.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

An Array of Contemporary Christio-Conjure Literature

Without question, Christio-Conjure in black women's writing extends well beyond the five texts examined in this study, with writers like Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison contributing to the discourse of Christio-Conjure through their fiction narratives. Since self-affirmation through spiritual renewal and transcendence functions as a core theme in Christio-Conjure literature, these afrofemcentric texts often contain tales of spiritual liberation. The central character in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson, is a middle-aged, middle class African American woman. Born with a birth caul, Avey is destined to possess "special powers of seeing and knowing" (Marshall 218). In the urban North, Avey, like Cocoa in *Mama Day*, is physically disconnected from her Gullah roots on the island of Tatum. More significantly, however, she is mentally disconnected from the Africanized spirituality that her great-Aunt Cuney helped sustain on the Sea Island. As such, Avey's mission throughout the text is one of spiritual awakening and reconnection.

While on vacation in the Caribbean Avey is given an opportunity to re-connect with her cultural and spiritual past. Aunt Cuney assumes the role of a Holiness preacher, imploring Avey to reach back, bridge the gulf, and reconnect with her spiritual past. As an archetypal Christio-Conjure character, Aunt Cuney's blended spiritual beliefs typify the Christio-Conjure religious paradigm. Her culturally diverse system of beliefs substantiates Genovese's theory of "Conjuring, voodoo, and Obeah" (217) as compatible with Christianity. Although a male figure, Lebert, presides over Avey's Christio-Conjure

conversion in Carriacou, the power of the black female is nevertheless privileged in this novel.

Avey undergoes her rite of passage on the Caribbean island of Carriacou where she is introduced to Christio-Conjure. Embracing the traditions passed down by her ancestors Lebert, Rosalie, and Aunt Cuney, Avey finally begins to make sense of her life. Like Indigo who assumes the cultural role of Aunt Haydee in Shange's novel, Avey inherits Aunt Cuney's role as family storyteller. Her sense of spiritual renewal also foreshadows a closer connection with her grandchildren as well as mended relations with her estranged daughter, Marion. In order for Avey to locate her missing self, she must reconnect with the Christio-Conjure tradition. After achieving this reconnection in Carriacou, her concerns are no longer temporal/material; instead, they become spiritual/familial, and via Christio-Conjure, Avey serves as a spiritual bridge between familial generations.

In Marshall's *Praisesong* as well as in Morrison's *Beloved*, Christio-Conjure serves as "mythical/spiritual" (Sojourner 277) realm of black women's existence. Like *Baby of the Family*, *Beloved*, featuring the spirit of the deceased title character, is often described as a ghost story. Angry that her mother, Sethe, murdered her as an infant, the character of *Beloved* is a menacing presence in the novel. Like Rachel, in *Baby of the Family*, who chooses death over enslavement, Sethe employs analogous logic to justify her murder of *Beloved*; as an act of mercy, she kills *Beloved* to spare her from enslavement.

In the novel, though Amy, Paul D., Denver, and Ella possess the power to restore others, Baby Suggs, holy, *Beloved*'s grandmother, is endowed with a mythical form of restorative power. Similar to Minnie in *The Salt Eaters* and Sapphira in *Mama Day*, Baby Suggs, as her name indicates, possesses a "holy" healing power and functions in the text as

an archetypal Christio-Conjure character. She is infused with superhuman qualities as she—like Christ—magically multiplies food at field gathering in order to feed all present. Her ability to help others, however, like Rachel and Miss Lizzie in *Baby of the Family*, is more potent after death. From beyond the grave, Baby Suggs administers “healing strength to her loved ones” (Morrison 95). Additionally, Baby Suggs, in spirit form, prods her granddaughter, Denver, to overcome her sense of isolation and step beyond the gate of 124 Bluestone Road.

But, the intervention of the local citizenry is required to rescue Sethe’s home from the threat of Beloved. A community of Christio-Conjuring women finally come to the aid of Sethe and Denver, determined to exorcise Beloved’s harrowing presence from their home. Some brought Conjure ingredients “stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks,” while others brought their “Christian faith” (257). But according to the narrator, “[m]ost brought a little of both” (257). Drawing upon a scycretized faith, “the voices of the women searched for the right combination” as “a wave of sound [. . .] broke over Sethe [. . .] she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (257). In this scene, the local women “brought a little of both” Christian and Conjure faith on their spiritual rescue mission. Sethe is figuratively absolved of her murderous sin, and she and Denver are cleansed of Beloved’s agonizing presence.

Cinematic Christio-Conjure

The Christio-Conjure thematic is so artistically embedded in African American culture that its presence extends beyond the realm of black women’s literature into the genre of film. Like the novels I’ve discussed, in many ways, Julie Dash’s film script, *Daughters of the Dust*, is also a Christio-Conjure text. While the cinematic version of the

film includes Christio-Conjure images, like Nana's "Hand" in the closing scene featuring a Conjure gris-gris bag symbolically placed on top of the holy Bible, Dash's script notes convey more profoundly the influence of Christio-Conjure in Dash's artistic project.

Set in 1902, the "dust" in the script's title references the Peazant family's survival on the dusty, sandy, seemingly non-life-sustaining soil that characterizes their island home. Contrasting the Western-based, eurocentric perceptions of reality espoused by characters such as Viola and Haagar,¹ Nana Peazant, Belial, Eula, and the spirit of the unborn ancestor/child² offer alternate, afrocentric perceptions. Specifically, Dash, like the novelists discussed, incorporates the commanding tale of "Ibo Landing"³ in her text. Like Naylor's Willow Springs, Dash's Ibo Landing is a fictitious Gullah island. The placement of these narratives in the Sea Islands marks this space, like the spaces of Haiti and Louisiana, as a fertile site of Christio-Conjure spiritual preservation.

One scene features "a procession of Gullah men, women and children wearing white robes [. . .] following a Baptist minister to their baptismal waters," as the minister beckons the island's Muslim inhabitant "Bilial! Bilial Muhammed. Come join us. Come wash away your sins in the blood of the lamb of Jesus" (144). The script include a Muslim and a Native American, who each represent alternate systems of religious belief. As well, some members of the Peazant family practice Christianity while others subscribe to Conjure—that is, until the Peazants collectively undergo their Christio-Conjure conversion.

Dash incorporates the Christio-Conjure element of spirit possession in the script and indicates that Iona and Myown are "taken into a spiritual possession" (97) like Marie in *Voodoo Dreams* and Sassafrass in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. In addition to spirit

possession, *Daughters of the Dust* also includes the theme of ancestral reverence. Like Aunt Haydee's protective spirit residing in Indigo's blue jar in Shange's novel, Dash's script features "Nana Peazant's Bottle Tree, perched in front of their house for protection" (97). Nana admonishes her grandson Eli to "keep in touch with the dead," since "[m]an's power doesn't end with death. We just move on to a new place" where "we watch over our living family" (93). Although the inhabitants of Ibo Landing share a rich and diverse spiritual legacy, Christio-Conjure themes saturate the script.

A dichotomy exists in the script between the physical spaces of the North (mainland) and the South (island). The ideals of Christianity from the mainland symbolize cultural progress and Conjure symbolizes cultural tradition. In the script, the spiritual challenge hinges upon the adaptability of Christio-Conjure to meet the Peazants' spiritual needs on both the island and the mainland. In relation to the physical space of Ibo Landing, the spirit of the Unborn Child says, "[i]n this quiet *place*, years ago, my family knelt down and caught a glimpse of the eternal. We were the children of those who chose to survive" (133 added emphasis). Moreover, Nana contends that "[t]his was the worst *place* to have been born during slavery" (105 added emphasis). The script contains the paradox of a physical space that embodies both the tragedy and triumph of the island people immersed in Christio-Conjure.

Nana, the matriarch of the Peazant family who was born in slavery, will remain on the island, but she is distressed about her family's migration North. As the personification of the Conjure tradition, Nana participates in various activities that represent vestiges of West African spirituality. For example, she makes a "charm bag" (150) to help protect herself and her loved ones from various forms of calamity. She

feels particularly compelled to counsel her grandson, Eli, since his wife, Eula, has been raped and is now pregnant. Eli's sense of uncertainty about the child's paternity deteriorates his loving relationship with Eula and places his marriage in shambles. Feeling bitterness and despair, Eli reminisces about his childhood and recalls his reverence for Nana as a goddess and as a constant source of protection; but as an adult he feels vulnerable and believes his ancestors are "too deep in their graves to" (95) protect his family from tragedy.

Nana attempts to instill in Eli ancient forms of West African wisdom to help him cope with and overcome his sense of despair. She explains, "I'm trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit. [. . .] I'm trying to give you something to take North with you, along with all your great big dreams" (96). She further instructs him to "[c]all on those old Africans [. . .]. Let those old souls come into your heart [. . .]. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain't from this day and time. Because when you leave this island [. . .] you ain't going to no land of milk and honey" (97). Moreover, she is concerned that the young family members will abandon the rich cultural traditions that have sustained past generations of Peazants. Nana places upon Eli the responsibility of keeping "the family together up North. That's the challenge facing all you free Negroes," and she urges him to "celebrate our ways" (97).

Sensing the urgency of the matter and resolute in her Conjure beliefs, Nana calls upon the ancestors to intercede. The ancestors summon forth the spirit of Eli's unborn daughter to help dispel the turmoil that casts a grim shadow over the entire Peasant family. The spirit of the Unborn Child indicates she is "traveling on a spiritual mission" (134) to "convince [her] daddy that [she is] his child" (124). Her mission is successful as

she leads Eli to his family's graveyard where he is "mounted" (142) and experiences a vision that verifies his paternity. The Peazants, however, are unaware that Nana's Conjure-based intervention ultimately facilitates the psychic healing of Eli and Eula, as they anticipate the birth of the Unborn Child.

As the "fruit of an ancient tree" (154), Nana functions in the script as the archetypal Conjure character, while her granddaughter, Yellow Mary, in many ways serves as her modern, mainland counterpart. Unlike Nana who has remained on Ibo Landing her entire life, Yellow Mary has lived abroad on the American mainland and in Cuba. Ironically, she returns to the island on the eve of the rest of the family's departure. For individual members of the Peazants, she represents an enigma. Nana, for example, is especially interested in the St. Christopher's charm Yellow Mary wears as a testament to her Catholic conversion. Nana has never been introduced to the Catholic saints, since the Christians on Ibo Landing are Baptists. Yellow Mary explains that her necklace is a "St. Christopher's charm for travelers on a journey;" in turn Nana asks, "What kind of belief is that? Does he protect you?" (117). Nana seems neither judgmental nor disapproving and she is satisfied that her granddaughter is humble enough to appeal to a higher source for divine protection. The specific source of the protection, while certainly a curiosity, is otherwise immaterial to Nana.

Focusing on Yellow Mary's charm, the script notes indicate a "[s]yncretism of religion—Yoruba god 'Basoco' founder of destiny has been replaced by St. Christopher" (116), demonstrating religious compatibility rather than polarization. Yellow Mary's worship of the Catholic saint as a transformed African deity is the first indication that despite her "new world" Christian packaging, that inside she, like Nana, is the "fruit of

[the] ancient” (154) Conjure tradition. Unlike her family members on Ibo Landing, Yellow Mary has broad cultural exposure and has acquired wealth. Also contrasting some of her family members, Yellow Mary does not cloak her fear of social oppression and sexual victimization within the guise of Christian piety. Instead, she openly combats her feelings of defenselessness and victimization (for she too, like Eula, has endured rape). Eschewing social conformity, she deliberately chooses her professional role as prostitute and consciously defines herself as a lesbian.

Viola, however, masks many of her insecurities in the name of Christianity and rebukes the Conjure tradition instilled in her by Nana. She proudly professes, “[w]hen I left these islands, I was a sinner and I didn’t even know it. But” I “touched that mainland, and fell into the arms of the Lord” (114). She suffers from internalized racism and discounts the traditional African customs and beliefs espoused by Nana in favor of the dominant culture’s Western ideology. She demonstrates her level of Western refinement by stating, “I’ve commissioned Mr. Snead to document our family’s crossing over to the mainland.[. . .] ‘What’s past is prologue’ [. . .] I see this day as their first steps towards progress” (79). Unlike Cocoa in *Mama Day* who is disconcerted by the degree of Western acculturation illustrated in her unconscious quote of Shakespeare, in contrast, Viola’s use of a Shakespearean quote marks her pride in her level of Western acculturation. She thinks many of the islanders “believe everything is caused by conjure, magic or their ancestors,” leaving “nothing to God” (149). Thus, she perpetuates a false division between Christianity and Conjure. Moreover, she attempts to sway Nana away from her traditional Conjure beliefs and practices. With the lure of Christian salvation,

she pleads, “[t]he Lord will carry us through, Nana. Trust in Jesus [. . .] [we] don’t need any charms of dried roots and flowers” (150).

Like Viola, Haagar also glorifies Western culture at the expense of disparaging West African tradition.⁴ But in contrast to Viola, whose attitude toward Nana is patronizing, Haagar is unabashedly disrespectful. She refers to Nana’s practice of Conjure as “an old woman’s magic” (131), and declares that she is tired of Nana’s old stories, root potions, and Hoodoo (130). Moreover, she is determined that her daughters not “be like those old Africans fresh off the boat” (130). In the “new world” where they are moving, she wants them to “grow up to be decent ‘somebodies’” (130-31). Haagar’s self-righteousness is more insidious than Viola’s, for she has internalized the dominant culture’s oppression so thoroughly that she regards her daughters as property/possessions—reflected in their names, Myown and Iona (I own her)—rather than as individual, independent persons (131). Displaying her Christian arrogance and “defying the ancestors” Haagar announces: “[a]s God’s my witness,” when “I leave this place, never again will I live in [the ancestral] domain” (102). She is eager to escape Ibo Landing and anxious to abandon the rich Conjure tradition embedded in the island culture.

While Haagar’s goal is to disconnect culturally from Ibo Landing, Nana is determined to foster a sense of unity and connection among the members of the family moving North. She tries to enlighten Haagar, the self-proclaimed “educated person” (130), who refuses to recognize the spiritual virtue of Conjure. But Nana grows impatient with Haagar’s arrogance and impudence and exclaims, “[y]ou’re a natural fool, Haagar Peazant. Nobody” said “old souls were living inside those glass jars. The bottle

tree reminds us of who was here and who's gone on. You study on the colors and shapes. You appreciate the bottle tree" as "you appreciate your loved ones" (148).

Haagar, however, is obstinate and unyielding in her Christian ignorance and condescension. In contrast, Nana is the embodiment of wisdom, resilience, and fortitude. Unlike Haagar, she is perceptive and intelligent enough to "change with the times" (117) and accept the efficacy of Christianity without abandoning her spiritual principles rooted in Conjure. Her spiritual position represents the antithesis of the eurocentric/Christian position initially assumed by Avey in *Praisesong*. But in order to bridge past and future generations, Nana, like Avey in *Praisesong*, must acknowledge Christio-Conjure as an avenue for spiritual renewal, affirmation, and empowerment.

Ultimately, Nana Peazant transforms into an archetypal Christio-Conjure character. As the script concludes, we see Nana embracing Yellow Mary's St. Christopher's charm and the Holy Bible with her "charm bag"—also known as a "Hand" (150)—placed on top of it. No other cinematic image more lucidly conveys the merging ideologies of the Christio-Conjure religious tradition. During the closing ceremony Nana has all of the departing family members kiss her "Hand" which rests upon the bible as a symbolic gesture. She beckons her family members: "[t]ake my 'Hand.' I'm the one that can give you strength.[. . .] Take me wherever you go. I'm your strength" (160). Haagar, however, destined "to remain unenlightened and disenfranchised forever" (161), is the only one who refuses Nana's entreaty. As a result, Haagar pays a "transit fee" to "the old souls" when her daughter, Iona, defying her pleas and demands, remains on the island with her Native American lover, Julian St. Last Child.

With the exception of Haagar, the other Peazants (including Viola, Yellow Mary, Eli, Eula, Myown and Iona) are humble and sensible enough to accept Nana's symbolic invitation into a new, blended form of spirituality. The closing scene with the procession of Peazants bowing before Nana and kissing her "Hand," signifies the family's metaphorical conversion. In this scene, Dash is not only a pioneer in the cinematic treatment of Christio-Conjure but is also the first artist to offer the image of a *group* rather than an *individual* conversion. Throughout this scene, Nana functions as the salvation of the Peazant family. She implores her descendants to retain their cultural past in their new lives on the mainland.

The characters that stay on Ibo Landing with Nana—Iona and St. Julian Lastchild, Belial, Eula, Eli, the Unborn child, and Yellow Mary—remain "behind growing old, wiser, stronger" (164). They ensure that the sense of self-identity and spiritual affirmation associated with Christio-Conjure will be passed down to future generations on the Sea Island, while those departing the island carry it abroad. The final scene conveys a sense of balance, as the notion of cultural progression is coupled with the concept of historical retention: "the whole film," in fact, "is about retention, the saving of tradition, and the persistence of vision" (Dash 46). The closing scene in the script serves as a metaphor for the geographical dispersion and proliferation of Christio-Conjure.

The Theoretical Appeal of Christio-Conjure

Within the genre of Christio-Conjure, black woman artists view their work as didactic.⁵ For example, through her writing Ntozake Shange assumes the responsibility of instilling in young black girls the belief that no one "can tend to their emotional health other than themselves" (qtd. in Collins 99). Since black women have struggled against racio-gendered oppression from their introduction to America until the present, for black

women artists, Christio-Conjure is a creative tool employed to “heal the psychic scars inflicted on African people since the slave trade began” (Tate 70). Thus, Christio-Conjure represents a crucial component in the conscious politicization of black women’s art. The relationship between art and activism among African American women illustrates an embrace of communal values and a rejection of the West’s emphasis on individual progress and prosperity.⁶ Many black women writers envision themselves as active participants in their communities rather than disconnected artists. All the artists featured in this discussion consciously create therapeutic works that advocate the development and transformation of black women’s consciousness, and transformed through Christio-Conjure, their protagonists actualize a black, women-centered consciousness.

Because “discourses always function in relation to power” (McHoul and Grace 39), Christio-Conjure functions as a means of subversion in black women’s lives and in their texts, and the multifarious nature of Christio-Conjure bolsters its theoretical appeal. Ideologically, for example, Christio-Conjure shapes, defines, and instills a healthy self-perception in its followers by accentuating a powerful, blended construct of healing and resiliency. Religiously, Christio-Conjure’s ritualistic ceremonies and rites crafted by African Americans defy repressive forms of Christianity imposed by the dominant culture. Creatively, Christio-Conjure is an artistic medium that conveys the unique experiences and concerns of African Americans, particularly black women. Theoretically, Christio-Conjure is a critical lens useful in interpreting and exploring recurring themes in black women’s art. While the oppressive forces of racism and sexism are ideologically, religiously, artistically, and theoretically manifest in American

culture, so are forms of resistance against it.⁷ From ideology to practice, Christio-Conjure serves expressly as black women's multi-edged weapon of defense and defiance against racio-sexual oppression.⁸

Although my focus here has been contemporary black women's fiction set in the South, the application of Christio-Conjure within other literary genres is potentially vast. The analysis of fictional Christio-Conjure written by black women and set in the urban North—like Gayl Jones' *The Healing* (1999)—is an untreated area of study. Also, black women's drama—like the one act plays written by Georgia Douglas Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston in the early twentieth century—contains aspects Christio-Conjure that have yet to be critically explored. Furthermore, beyond the exclusive realm of black women's writing, slave narratives (male and female) as well as novels, short stories, and plays by black men feature Christio-Conjure characters and themes that are ripe for analysis. The study of Christio-Conjure in these areas can provide further critical insight into issues of race, gender, and religion at the intersection of art and politics in American culture.

NOTES

Chapter One

¹ For specific and detailed documentation of the “fusing” of religious cultures in America consult John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972); Eugene D. Geneovese, *Roll Jordan Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); James Haskins, *Witchcraft, Mysticism, and Magic in the Black World* (New York: Doubleday, 1974); Paul Johnson, *African American Christianity: Essays in History*. (Berkley, U California P, 1994); LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William and Morrow, 1963); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1977); Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933); Sidney Mintz and Richard Price. *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. (Boston: Beacon, 1976); Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Glory: A Picture of the Church among Negroes in the Rural South* (New York: Friendship P, 1947); Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1987); Norman E. Whitten Jr. and John F. Szwed, *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Free P, 1970); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated P, 1921).

² Some examples include the “old advisor,” Sandy Jenkins, in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), the Conjure man in Henry Bibb’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1849), the Maroon Conjure men inhabiting the backwoods of North Carolina in Martin Delaney’s *Blake* (1859-62), Dinkie, the African Conjure man in William Wells Brown’s autobiography, *My Southern Home, or the South and Its People* (1880), Aun’ Peggy and Tenie in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899), as well as the protagonist in Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies, a Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932). However, the representations of Conjure by black male authors sharply contrasts its treatment by black women. Black male writers traditionally address issues of individualism, including psychological and economic survival in a capitalist and racist America.

³ In other words, in Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* and Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* alternative West African-based systems of belief represent credible, viable options for solving various dilemmas and, moreover, represent ways to create positive change in life.

⁴ Confirming my characterization here, Gates contextualizes Hurston’s role as literary foremother as follows: “Hurston has been ‘rediscovered’ in a manner unprecedented in the black tradition: several black women writers [. . .] have openly turned to her works [. . .] in acts of textual bonding [. . .] this is a major development, one that heralds our refinement of the notion of tradition [. . .]. Hurston and her daughters are a tradition within a tradition, a black woman’s voice.” (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,

Afterword. "Zora Neale Hurston: A Negro Way of Saying," *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. 294)

⁵ It is worth noting that Hurston treats the amalgamation of Christian and West African religion in her fiction as well. See Katie Cannon's *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1996). Here, Cannon identifies "*Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Hurston, 1939) [as] an allegorical satire concerning the affinities between Voodoo and Christianity." (86)

⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, among others, employs the terms voodoo and hoodoo synonymously: "Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America" (*Mules and Men* 193). Also, regarding the term Vodou Michael Laguerre notes "the name voodoo derives from Vodun, the name of the principal deity of [. . .] Yoruba rites" (qtd. in Baker 80). Editors Olmos and Paravisini-Gerbert in "Religious Syncretism and Caribbean Culture," the introduction to *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (1997), contend that the spelling of Voodoo (known as Voodoo, Vodoun, Voudoun, and Vaudon) and many other terms of African origin used to describe various practices and beliefs is a constant source of debate among scholars and practitioners. Rather than "arbitrarily impose [a] preferred spelling" the editors respect "individual preferences" (3). As well, variations in capitalization frequently occur as seen not only in Hurston's work but also in contemporary writing too, e.g., Luisah Teish's *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (1985).

⁷ Explicating the historical significance of St. John's Eve, Bodin asserts that, "especially notable was the increased participation by whites [. . .] in an 1896 Voodoo festival on St. John's Eve held on Bayou St. John near New Orleans. St. John's Eve has been a special date since ancient times in Europe when pagan sun worshipers rolled blazing wheels down hills to celebrate the sun's descent. The Louisiana mixture of African Animism, Haitian Voodoo, and European influences is seen in the adoption of this date as the highpoint in the Louisiana Voodoo calendar." (Ron Bodin. *Voodoo Past and Present*. Lafayette: U Southwestern Louisiana, 1990. 22)

⁸ Hemenway, Hurston's biographer, broaches the issue of Hurston's personal ties with Voodoo in New Orleans (123) and notes that "toward the end of her Voodoo study in Haiti she became quite ill and was convinced that her illness was related to her Voodoo research" (258). Portions of *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* contain the tension and anxiety Hurston most certainly experienced as both a researcher and practitioner of Voodoo.

⁹ I submit that African diasporic women are heirs to a symbolic legacy of female power and authority perpetuated in African culture. Na'im Akbar substantiates my claim through his discussion of the "Mother Principle." He not only highlights the privileged position of the female in West African culture, but he also suggests this position of authority is a divine mandate from God. He notes that among "[t]he Ashante of Ghana,

the Queen Mother is so exalted, the King cannot exercise/execute any power/authority without consulting his mother first. The symbol of the Mother is the most powerful in creation [. . .] you can't get here unless you come through your mother. The Mother provides food, nourishment, protection. Bacteria and toxins are filtered in the womb. All this is imprinted into one's unconscious life. God uses 'Mother' as a way to teach the lesson that one is protected by a divine process. 'Mother' is the symbol for the reality, certainty, bounty, prosperity, and protection of God. Humans learn the lesson of bounty and prosperity of God through their Mothers. God works to manifest His presence through the principle of the Mother." (Akbar, Na'im. Public Speech. Hillside Chapel and Truth Center, Atlanta, GA. 30 May 1999)

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of Erzulie, consult Dyan's article "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," *Research in African Literatures* 25.2 (1994): 5-31.

¹¹ For further reading on the cultural significance of the goddess figure in African culture see Judith Gleason's, *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987); Sabrina Sojourner, "From the House of Yemanja: The Goddess Heritage of Black Women," *My Soul is a Witness*, Ed. Gloria Wade Gayles (Boston: Beacon P, 1995) 272-78; Luisah Teish, *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹² While Vodun is recognized as a religion originating in Benin (Dahomey), Africa, Rod Davis says, "Vodun, voodoo, vaudou, vaudoux, and vo-do" are some of the numerous variations of the term voodoo. He prefers "Voudou," which he says is a Creole-based spelling of the term common in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Louisiana. (*American Voudou: A Journey into a Hidden World*. Denton, TX: U of North Texan P, 1999. 9)

¹³ The term "womanist," coined by Alice Walker is partially defined as follows: "a black feminist or feminist of color." (Alice Walker. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt, 1983. xi)

¹⁴ In the conclusion, Dash's film is treated extensively as a Christio-Conjure text.

¹⁵ Further reinforcing the syncretized relationship between Christianity and Conjure, Hurston describes the holy Bible as "the great[est] conjure book in the world." (*Mules and Men* 287)

¹⁶ Similarly, Hurston, in correspondence addressed to her anthropological mentor, Frantz Boas, attempts to invert the mainstream disparaging characterization of African-based religion as primitive; she writes, "Is it safe for me to say that baptism is an extension of water worship as a part of pantheism just as the sacrament is an extension of cannibalism. Isn't the use of candles in the Catholic chu[r]ch a relic of fire worship? Are not all the uses of fire upon the altars the same thing? Is not the Christian ritual rather one of attenuated nature-worship, in the fire, water, and blood. Might not the

frequently mentioned fire of the Holy Ghost be an unconscious fire worship. May it not be a deification of fire?" (Charles Joyner. "Believer I Know." Ed. Paul Johnson. *African American Christianity: Essays in History*. Berkley: U of California P, 1994. 36)

¹⁷ Mam'zelle is the Louisiana Creole translation for the French word Mademoiselle, a form of polite address for a girl or young woman in a French-speaking area.

¹⁸ According to Teish, a two-headed person is a medium, i.e. a person thought to have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead or with agents of another world or another dimension. (250)

¹⁹ For further study on Christianity in black women's writing, consult Katie Cannon's *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1985) and Kimberly Rae Connor's *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of Afro-American Women* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995).

²⁰ I also employ the term Conjure because of its association with creativity, especially regarding the manipulation of words, images, and various other art forms as creative acts. Definitions of conjure include "evoke; imagine; picture"—among others that associate the term with magical acts and spirit contact.

²¹ Discussing the current proliferation of "neo-African religions, Chireau says that the "late twentieth-century growth of Neo-African religions such as Santeria and Vodun thrive within urban centers, attracting individuals from all races and religious backgrounds and reinforcing the internationalization of black sacred traditions." (Yvonne Chireau. *Conjuring: An Analysis of African American Folk Beliefs and Practices*. 1994. Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Princeton University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Recommended for Acceptance by the Department of Religion. 290-91)

²² In African American literature the book of Exodus remains a biblical allusion from slave narratives (e.g., Harriet Tubman as a Moses figure) to contemporary writing (e.g., Sapphira in *Mama Day* as a Moses figure).

²³ Examples of such clandestine gatherings in black women's fiction include the passage in *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* in which Sassafrass, as a member of the New World Found Collective, experiences a "mounting," as well as Marie in *Voodoo Dreams*, who orchestrates massive gatherings at Lake Ponchartrain and Bayou St. John. *Beloved*, too, includes one such scene featuring song and dance with Baby Suggs, Holy multiplying food, like the biblical image of Christ multiplying the fish and bread.

Chapter Two

¹ Bodin details the historical emergence of Christio-Conjure in Louisiana, while documenting the Haitian influence: “Columbus discovered the West Indies island of Hispaniola and claimed it for Spain in 1492. Spain recognized French rule of the western part of the island in 1697 under the terms of the treaty of Ryswick and the French called this western half of the island Saint-Domingue. Beginning in 1769 a series of slave revolts rocked the island leading to a general slave revolt and freedom in 1791, winning independence for Haiti in 1804. Prior to independence, slave ships destined for Haiti housed all classes of Dahomey society and the ‘Vodu’ religion was transported to the New World by believers and by priests on board who knew the religion’s rites. The Dahomey “Vodu” religion took root and flourished in Haiti as slaves met clandestinely under the cover of religious assemblages designed by masters to introduce the slave to Christianity. For some years there had been a movement of slaveowners and slaves between Haiti and New Orleans, but in 1809 a large number of Haitian planters who had refuged in Cuba during Touissant L’Ouverture’s Haitian revolution, were expelled from Cuba and, with their slaves, made their way to New Orleans. Many of these slaves were worshippers and devotees of “Vodu.” With the United States purchase of Louisiana in 1803 owners continued to press for the importation of slaves and increased numbers of West Indies slaves entered Louisiana from Haiti. So a considerable Haitian slave presence was felt in Louisiana, and these slaves were known to practice various African and Haitian “Vodu” rites. Louisiana possessed a unique culture, a unique environment. In this very different world emerged a unique brand of Voodoo—less organized than the Haitian model, influenced by the mysteries of Catholicism and the basic beliefs of European superstition, it was business-oriented.” (Bodin 7-13)

² According to Victor Klein, “Marie Laveau was born either in New Orleans or Santo Domingo sometime around 1794. Her father was probably Caucasian. From all accounts, and from the faded portrait hanging in the Cabildo Museum in New Orleans, she was an attractive, fair complexioned mulatto. Her vocation was that of a hairdresser, a trade she used to her monetary betterment. It is recorded that she married on 4 August 1819, to one Jacques Paris, a free black. In 1826 her marriage was dissolved by death. In that same year she began a life-long relationship with Christophe Glapion, also a free black. February 1827 marked the birth of her daughter, namesake and heir to her occult empire. It is not known if her father was Paris or Glapion. Laveau’s pregnancy overlapped Paris’s death and her relationship with Glapion. During her long life (1794-1881) she gave birth to fifteen children her interest in Voodoo dates from the year 1826, the year her legal husband died. Marie departed this life 15 June 1881. Her daughter, namesake and successor followed her several decades later. It is from the silent, secret dark abyss of death that Marie and her daughter allegedly still reign as ghost queens in the ancient St. Louis Cemetery #1. Both Maries are entombed in this cemetery which is the oldest existing kirkyard in the city.” (Victor Klein. *New Orleans Ghosts*. Chapel Hill, NC: Professional P, 1993. 97-102)

³ While a preponderance of scholarship focuses attention on the African influence on the transformation of Christianity in African American culture (e.g. John Blassingame, Eugene D. Geneovese, James Haskins, LeRoi Jones, Benjamin E. Mays, Harry V. Richardson, Carter G. Woodson, et al), on the contrary, Ron Bodin highlights the European influence upon African religious customs and beliefs noting that “elements of late nineteenth-century Louisiana Voodoo are quite medieval and very European. The European influence on the constantly evolving Voodoo experience is better understood when one considers that in medieval Europe a fine line separated religion and magic. Even the Christian “faithful” were known to seek remedies for their earthly problems by “worshipping” saints who had performed miracles, by reciting prayers, and venerating the holy altar. Paralleling the religious life of the church in medieval Europe was another belief system rooted in ancient paganism and characterized by wizards, sorcerers, charmers, conjurers, prophets, and practitioners who combined their rites with the recitation of prayers and the use of Christian charms. With the increased participation of whites in Voodoo and with the influence of New World Catholicism on practitioners, it is no surprise that in the late nineteenth-century Lafcadio Hearn, a literary figure and a keen observer of cultures, claimed that the European influence had succeeded in considerably modifying African Voodoo in Louisiana.” (Bodin 25-27)

⁴ According to Gay Wilentz, “gris gris” is a Senegalese term for a charm bag or talisman. (72)

⁵ According to Touissant Desossiers, “it is not clear how Marie Laveau actually became involved in Voodoo. An active society existed before Laveau and it is evident that the society was influenced by natives of Haiti such as the heavily tattooed Dr. John, John Montenet, who some claim first blended Haitian Voodoo, Catholicism, the snake oracle, and ‘flim-flam’—enticing white women to his ‘advice parlor’ with his listening skills, sure demeanor, and ‘magical cures’” (Touissant Desossiers. “Haitian Voodoo.” *Americas*. XX (1970): 35-39). Luisah Teish also discusses an historical Dr. John, reporting that, “Jean Montaigne—also known as Bayou John and Doctor John—was an impressive Senegalese man bearing the tribal marks of a royal family. He had been the slave of a Cuban seaman and had traveled with his master back to Africa. He purchased his freedom, bought and married fourteen female slaves, and acquired a fifteenth wife, a white woman. This man owned his own home and dressed in elaborate Spanish costumes. Bayou John was widely sought by Blacks and whites alike for his herbal remedies and fortune telling.” (174)

⁶ The Hamitic curse refers to the biblical character, Ham, who witnesses his father, Noah, unclothed and intoxicated, and deserts him. In retaliation for Ham’s neglect, God—upon Noah’s request—curses Ham’s descendants to perpetual servitude in Genesis 9:22-25. Historically there has been widespread manipulation of this biblical passage to justify the enslavement and subjugation of blacks throughout the diaspora. Yet, there is no reference in this passage to the black race or culture, and thus no textual evidence to substantiate this racist interpretation.

⁷ According to Teish, Damballah is the Dahomean snake deity. (Teish 31). In *Voodoo Dreams* Damballah, is the favored and most powerful of the spirits and supreme god of Conjure/Voodoo.

⁸ In addition to Damballah, the serpent god, in the West African pantheon, Legba represents the “remover of barriers and the protector of homes, and Agwé presides over seas and ships.” (Bodin 97)

⁹ Voodooiene is the French-influenced label for a female practitioner of Voodoo; the term is synonymous with Voodoo priestess and/or Voodoo queen.

¹⁰ Folklorist Niles Puckett provides historical documentation of such a ceremony; he says “secret Voodoo meetings were held at night and were presided over by a king and queen. The queen was the dominant figure and was elected to her position for life (the king was often her husband). The meetings were started with the adoration of a snake. So powerful an influence was the queen that believers were reminded that to break with her was to break with the gods themselves. Individual members came up to implore the Voodoo god, to invoke blessings on loved ones, and curses on enemies. The king listened until the “spirit” moved him. He would place the queen on the ornate box containing the snake oracle. The queen convulsed and spoke through “split lips” in an unknown tongue. An offering was taken up. Throughout the ritual, tafia, an intoxicating mixture akin to rum, was consumed to heighten the effects of the ceremony. This often feared Voodoo society may have been the most open under the “reign” of the last great Voodoo queen, Marie Laveau.” (Niles Puckett. *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1926. 181-185)

¹¹ Virginia Hamilton says “there are numerous accounts of flying Africans and flying slaves in the black folktale literature. Such accounts are often combined with tales of slaves disappearing. A plausible explanation might be the slaves running away from slavery. In code language murmured from one slave to another, ‘Come fly away!’ might have been the words used. Another explanation is the wish-fulfillment motif, a detailed fantasy tale of suffering, of magic power exerted against the so-called Master, it was first told and retold by those who had only their imaginations to set them free.” (Virginia Hamilton. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985. 172-73)

Chapter Three

¹ According to Branch, griot is the European word for the African word “gewel,” a storyteller and historian. In the African tradition, “the griot is the most important storyteller in the community, a revered person who is entrusted with passing down the cultural history of a people through stories and songs” (Muriel Branch. *The Water Brought Us: The Story of the Gullah-Speaking People*. Cobblehill Books/Dutton: New York, 1995. 7). Tilford Brooks defines griot as “a French term for a professional musician of West Africa” (Tilford Brooks. *America’s Black Heritage*: Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984. 8). In addition, Francis Bebey says “griot is the term used throughout West Africa to designate a professional musician. They usually specialize in the art of invoking super natural beings of all kinds and sing their praises in order to ensure their pardon, protection or goodwill. He is concerned with not only the history of his people—its kings and ancestors, and the genealogy of the great men—but also, the wisdom of its philosophers and its thought-provoking riddles, and the ancestral proverbs. He is a living archive of his people’s traditions. But he is above all a musician, without whom no celebration or ritual would be complete; the profession is by no means a male prerogative. There are many women griots whose talents as singers and musicians are equally remarkable.” (Francis Bebey qtd. in Muriel Branch. *The Water Brought Us: The Story of the Gullah-Speaking People*. Cobblehill Books/Dutton: New York, 1995. 22-23)

² Although Mulberry is fictitious, Ansa situates the narrative within her personal birth state, Georgia. Detailing the history of the state, Brooks reports that “After resisting the pressure for twenty years, the trustees finally yielded, and slavery was introduced in 1751. The seaboard counties had black majorities by 1790. At the close of the antebellum period, the coast was the region of largest slave holdings in the state. The average was twenty per owner” (Robert Brooks. *Georgia Studies: Selected Writings*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 118). In addition, Bartley contends that the “coming of cotton revitalized slavery in Georgia. [. . .] In 1800, 36.5 percent of Georgians were slaves, and by 1820 the ratio of slaves to free population had climbed to 44 percent. [. . .] Cotton and slavery brought great wealth to Georgia, and Georgians paid dearly for it. [. . .] ‘When Southern statesmen count up the gains of slavery,’ a British traveler wrote, ‘let them not forget to count its cost. They may depend upon it, there is a heavy ‘per contra’ to the profits of niggerdom.’” (Numan Bartley. *The Creation of Modern Georgia*. Athens: U Georgia P, 1983. 14-16). This represents the historical context of the physical space in which *Baby of the Family* is set, providing fertile ground for the eminent rise of Christio-Conjure in the area.

³ In the traditional black church, call-response is often referred to as “talking back” to the preacher. (Geneva Smiteman. *Talkin and Testifyin The Language of Black American*. Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1977. 104)

⁴ In contemporary black women’s texts featuring the discourse of Christio-Conjure, the use of terms such as God, Lord, Father, Savior, Jesus, and Christ imply a

Christian sensibility, while references to West African deities such as Oya, Oshun, Erzulie, Damballah, and Shango suggest a Conjure frame of reference.

⁵ Sharon Robinson, critic and professor of midwifery and black healthcare systems, argues in her 1984 study for the *Journal of Nurse-Midwifery* that “the first lay midwife came to America in 1619, bringing with her a knowledge of health and healing based on her African background. With the growth of slave communities in America and slavery’s emphasis on the breeding of human chattel, black lay midwives performed important roles. They were everything from herbal to ritual specialists. Delivering babies was respectable, ancient work, and African American lay midwives, as well as the early midwives of most cultures, earned respect for their skills. From Reconstruction to the end of the nineteenth century, black lay midwives continued to deliver babies of both black and white women, particularly in rural, southern communities.” (Valerie Lee. *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 5-6)

⁶ Because the “passing on of the tradition to either a female relative or a young woman who had received a special calling from God was a matter of grave importance, the lines of authority and transmission of midwifery skills and lore were tightly controlled” (Holly Matthews. “Killing the Medical Self-Help Tradition Among African Americans: The Case of Lay Midwifery in North Carolina.” Eds. Hans Baer and Yvonne Jones. *African Americans in the South: Issues of Race, Class, and Gender*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992. 63)

⁷ In Europe, Valerie Lee says, “midwifery was a less-than-honorable profession. Birthing was regarded as an objectionable, private, and nasty business. The act of giving birth itself defiled the mother, who could be readmitted to the Church only after rites of purification, called “churching.” Whereas such countries as Germany, Italy, France, and England burned thousands of women healers, African American women healers come from a tradition more respectful of indigenous medical systems. In many African societies, midwives and women healers have used a pharmacopoeia of herbs to maintain balance in the lives of their patients. Midwives and healers have enjoyed their community role as facilitators of harmony, wholeness, and order. As such they continue to command respect. Such an attitude has given women healers vocational prestige.” (Lee 119 and 33)

⁸ Valerie Lee documents “other contributory explanations for the decline of midwifery including: 1) weakly organized midwifery organizations compared to aggressively organized professional medical organizations, such as the coalitions that the American Medical Association built; 2) establishment of all-male medical schools, barring women from access to medical knowledge; 3) increasing infant mortality rates, which were always a locus for scapegoating midwives and grannies in particular; 4) new surgical childbirth instruments which only doctors could use; 5) doctors’ alliances with upper-class white women; and 6) the growing presence of the black woman as the prototypical midwife.” (Lee 27)

⁹ Regarding the history of the figure of the black lay midwife in black women's writing, Lee contends that "[a]lthough feminist health workers and women patients in general have been able to effect a renewed interest in midwifery in general, it has taken a long list of womanist writers to come to the aid of the [black lay midwives]. Literature written by black women as early as the Harlem Renaissance subverts notions of patriarchal authority by reinscribing power to the [black lay midwives] and the other black women healers in the community." (Lee 8)

¹⁰ Community "Mother" or matriarch in the African American community is parallel to the Jamaican concept of the Nanas outlined by Hurston in *Tell My Horse*.

¹¹ Both Dr. Smithfield in *Mama Day* and Dr. Williams in *Baby of the Family* earned their medical degrees at Meharry Medical School. Located in Nashville, Tennessee, Meharry served as the premier medical school for African Americans from the early part of the twentieth century until the 1970s.

¹² Resistance was often a basis for black participation in supernatural activity in the eighteenth century, as it was in the nineteenth century. (Chireau 33)

¹³ At the intersection of medicine, religion, and literary theory Lee describes black lay midwives "as women committed as much to a spiritual tradition as to a medical one. Propelled by their sense of a divine mandate, both the fictional and historical [black lay midwives'] voice and ethic of caring and activism that is anchored in their self-defined spirituality." Noting the many spiritual frameworks that black critics have suggested for analysis, she contends that "the grannies testify theory and as such are womanist theologians." (Lee 18)

Chapter Four

¹ The issue of revolution in *The Salt Eaters* is a controversial subject among critics. Susan Willis criticizes the revolutionary aspect of *The Salt Eaters*, suggesting that: “For all its yearning and insight, the novel fails to culminate in revolution, fails to suggest even how social change might be produced” (Susan Willis. “Problematizing the Individual: Toni Cade Bambara’s Stories for the Revolution.” *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987. 129). I, however, support Derek Alwes’s analysis; he discounts Willis’s interpretation, asserting that “Bambara’s sense of the possibility of political revolution is not represented by the naïve belief in one single, radical revolutionary transformation after which everything is changed forever; it is a recognition that change occurs over time in the hearts and minds of individuals who create, participate in, and identify with a strong, unified community.” (Alwes, Derek. “The Burden of Liberty: Choice in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*. *African American Review*. 30.3 (Fall 1996): 360)

² The fictionalized feminist group, The Seven Sisters, which performs concerts and presents plays at various political and cultural events across the country in *The Salt Eaters* is suggestive of Luisah Teish’s altar circle, characterized in *Jambalaya* as “a rainbow.” In the group, Teish says, “we are dedicated to praising, protecting, and serving Mother Earth and Her children. We seek to create a tradition that will assure a good world for our descendants. A demonstrated effort to respect the ancestral culture of your altar sisters will de-fang the demon racism and inspire a level of trust. Let us enrich our individual lives by celebrating our collective diversity. All flowers are not roses.” (Teish 250-54)

³ Although Bambara’s depiction of salt emphasizes its healing/medicinal qualities, Gay Wilentz discusses both its positive and negative associations: “[s]alt and its effects is a common theme in the literature of many cultures, from its cautionary tale and the biblical story of Lot’s wife to the salutary use of salt in reviving the zombified. Like other images associated with oppression, salt has both a metaphorical and biological duality: Salt keeps us alive, but too much salt can also kill us.” (Wilentz 176)

⁴ Damballah is the Dahomean serpent deity who is the representative of all unknown ancestors, and is given access to the knowledge and experience of all the people who have lived before. (Teish 77)

⁵ Oshun is the Yoruba goddess of love, art, and sensuality. (Teish 40)

⁶ Oye is the Yoruba goddess of wind, water, fire and rainbows. (Teish 40)

⁷ Ogun is the Yoruba god of war and iron. (Robert Farris Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984. 52)

⁸ Gay Wilentz discusses the connection between the individual and the communal in *The Salt Eaters* positing that the novel “explores the necessary relationship between personal health, cultural affliction, political activism, and spiritual growth; moreover, it opens a door for the scientists to commune with the healers to fight for a healthy planet.” (78)

⁹ Alwes further connects the image of the mud mothers to the formation of racial identity in the text. He says, “the spiritual powers for healing available as an ancient aspect of racial identity are not treated as a metaphor in the novel; they are genuine powers that represent the most reliable source of cultural identity and, consequently, political power. The dominant image of these forces in the novel is the recurring vision of the mud mothers painting the walls of their cave; the women haunt Velma with a strong and urgent sense of primitive interiority. The cave of the mud mothers operates, of course, as a symbol of the cultural or racial womb [. . .].” (Alwes 359)

¹⁰ Haint, which means ghost, is an older term in the African American vernacular. (Geneva Smitherman. *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000. 157)

¹¹ Though East, rather than West African, Swahili is the official Bantu language of Tanzania and is widely used as a lingua franca in eastern and east-central Africa.

¹² Further inscribing the notion of science and technology as analogous endeavors, Newman characterizes both fields as modes of production: “[t]echnology—the field of productive technique, skill, method, procedure, and the like—can be helpfully regarded as the context of every aspect of religion, for every aspect of religion is, at least when considered from a certain perspective, concerned with some form of production. If this production is not something physical or material, then it may be a condition, a state of affairs, or a way of understanding.” (Jay Newman. *Religion and Technology: A Study in the Philosophy of Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997. 146)

¹³ Margo Anne Kelley says, out of all the novels they read in her class, *The Salt Eaters* was the only one that her students found inaccessible. After she provided a brief introduction to chemical dissipative systems (thermodynamics and the law of time) her students made connections to the text that gave them access to Bambara’s ideas. When she offered them tools derived from science—the dominant legitimating discourse of modern Western culture—they were able to see the role of science in the text as one of many knowledge systems being presented. (Kelley 480-91)

¹⁴ Discussing even further the unstable nature of Claybourne’s identity, Butler-Evens asserts, “in *The Salt Eaters* [. . .] community is the site of uncertainty and disintegration where heterogeneous, as well as dissonant and contradictory, desires surface” (Elliot Butler-Evens. “Rewriting and Revising in the 1980s: *Tar Baby*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Salt Eaters*.” *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in*

the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1989. 177)

Chapter Five

¹ In an historical overview of South Carolina, McCurry says, “The colony’s first settlers, Barbadian planters and their slaves combined to lend a plantation cast even to the Low Country’s earliest years. From 1725 to 1775 the Low Country was the richest region in British North America. South Carolina had a black majority population. By the Revolution, 80 percent of the lowcountry population was black and enslaved. The Low Country was not simply North America’s richest colony, it was also the most inequalitarian. Social inequality was most visibly racial. Virtually all of the black population—the lowcountry majority—that is, was enslaved and propertiless and, indeed, constituted the property of the wealthier others” (Stephanie McCurry. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. New York: Oxford U P, 1995. 28-32). Further discussing the history of blacks in the state of South Carolina, Joyner notes that the “first generation of slaves in South Carolina came mostly from the Caribbean. But the great expansion of rice culture in the early eighteenth century brought about an enormous increase in the young colony’s slave trade. The rice planters preferred Africans from the Senegal-Gambia region and from the Congo-Angola region. Nearly 40 percent of the Africans enslaved and brought to South Carolina between 1730 and the end of the legal slave trade came from Angola. Another 20 percent came from Senegambia, and the other 40 percent variously from the Windward and Gold coasts, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere” (Charles Joyner. *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1984. 205-06). In addition, Frazier says, “Charleston streets swarmed with blacks as slave-traders brought in cargo after cargo. Fabulous fortunes were reaped from black cargoes. The nonimportation agreement of 1769 specifically outlawed the importation of slaves. Lowcountry planters and would-be slave traders mindful of the enormous profits made before the Revolution, demanded that the state reopen the slave trade. The legislature voted to reopen the foreign traffic in slaves, which resumed on December 17, 1803. Over the next several years nearly 40,000 slaves were brought into Charleston, merchants profited handsomely, planters mortgaged their estates for more land, slaves and luxuries. The influx of new Africans made Charlestonians increasingly sensitive to any criticism of the institution. Violent responses represented a historic continuum to wall off the city from people and ideas perceived as threatening to slavery.” (Walter J. Frazier. *Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City*. Columbia, SC: U South Carolina P, 1989. 110-88)

² Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University. The name Kwanzaa is derived from the phrase “matunda ya kwanza” which means “first fruits” in Swahili, a Pan-African language which is the most widely spoken in Africa. It is a cultural holiday, not a religious one, thus available to and practiced by Africans of all religious faiths who come together based on the rich, ancient and varied common ground of their African heritage. Kwanzaa was established in 1966 in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement. It was created to reaffirm and restore a rootedness in African culture and emphasizes the importance of family, community and culture. It is celebrated from

December 26th through January 1st and focuses on seven African principles. (Nguzo Saba)

(<http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/origins1.html>)

(<http://www.globalindex.com/kwanzaa/>)

³ Oshun is the Yoruba goddess of love, art, and sensuality. (Teish 122)

⁴ According to Blackman, “Dance is a part of all developed religions. In divine services dance had an important ritual significance. Christianity had its main inheritance from the Jews and based itself on the Old Testament as support for its own ritual dances and ceremonies of divine service and even as direct command to praise God in dance. Similarly, certain passages in the New Testament have been adduced as partial motives for the introduction and preservation of religious dance. The dance in the Christian Church began in the latter part of the third century and continued throughout the centuries into our own time” (Louis Backman. *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*. London: Ruskin House, 1952. 328). Primus asserts that “[i]n emotional impact, group reaction, rhythms, tempos, actual steps and the exact precision with which they are done, dance in the Southern Baptist Churches so closely resembles the dance in Africa as to leave no doubt in the mind that the American form emerged from the African” (Pearl Primus. “Primitive African Dance and its Influences on Churches in the South.” In *The Dance Encyclopedia*. Ed. Anatole Chujoy. New York: A.S. Barnes, 1949. 389). Oliver reports that “[d]uring the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) preachers forcefully proclaimed the texts of the Psalms as justification for their belief in music and dance as vehicles for praise” (Paul Oliver. *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*. New York: Cambridge U P, 1984. 174). Thorpe contends that “religious beliefs of the West African tribes varied from kingdom to kingdom, village to village but three basic principles affected the distribution of ritual: one, religion was part of everyday life two, the religious practices included elaborate ritual; and three, these rituals involved much dancing” (Edward Thorpe. *Black Dance*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook P, 1990. 13). Hanna asserts that in West African religious tradition, “the spirit of the deceased exists in limbo between living and ancestral states until the performance of final mortuary rites which feature dance-plays. These physical and spiritual forms are similar to the dances in the Christian church to enable one to enter heaven.” (Judith Lynne Hanna. *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nov-Verbal Communication*. Austin: U Texas P, 1979. 112)

⁵ Warren says, “[w]hen the African was brought to the United States as a slave, he brought with him his music and dance, his history and his religion. The music, the dance, and the drums were an integral part of African religion and the African way of life.” (Fred Warren. *The Music of Africa*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970. 52)

⁶ Conjurers in the Gullah/Geechee culture, according to Joyner, “often enjoyed considerable influence and power among the slave community. The position of the conjurer was sometimes inherited, but more often was the result of peculiar circumstances of birth, such as being born feet-foremost or with a caul over the face.

Such children were considered to have special powers. They would be able to see spirits and other supernatural phenomena and were often taught the special lore of the conjurers. Conjurers in the Gullah/Geechee culture were highly regarded as healers. Africans had brought their highly esteemed pharmacopoeia with them to South Carolina as a part of their oral traditions.” (*Down by the Riverside*, Joyner 146-48)

⁷ African Americans “on the Sea Islands are known as Gullah in South Carolina and Geechee in Georgia, but the term Gullah is frequently used to include both groups” (William Bascom. “Gullah Folk Beliefs Concerning Childbirth.” *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia*. Eds. Mary Twining and Keith Baird. Trenton, NJ: Africa World P, 1982, 27). Jackson reports that “the origin of the term Gullah is uncertain. It is generally believed to be a derivation of the African Gola or Gora, names of African tribes from Liberia or a derivation of the African Angola, since many slaves were brought to the Sea Islands from Angola. ‘Geechee’ often used by blacks comes from the Ogeechee River, one of the prominent waterways in the area” (Juanita Jackson, et al. “The Sea Islands as a Research Area.” *Sea Island Roots: African Presence in the Carolinas and Georgia*. Eds. Mary Twining and Keith Baird. Trenton, NJ: Africa World P, 1982, 163). Furthermore, Branch believes that “Gullah (or Geechee as it is called in Georgia) is both language and people, according to Muriel Miller Branch. African Americans who live on the Sea Islands (a string of about thirty-five islands extending from Pawleys Island near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to Amelia Island on the Georgia-Florida border) are the descendants of enslaved Africans. The isolation of one Sea Island from another and from the mainland has enabled the Gullah-speaking people to preserve their language, and maintain many of their ancestral customs in a manner that makes them the most ‘authentic’ Americans of African descent.” (Muriel Branch. *The Water Brought Us: The Story of the Gullah-Speaking People*, New York: Cobblehill Books/Dutton, 1995, 8-9)

⁸ For further reading on Josephine Baker consult Phyllis Rose’s *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*. Vintage Books: New York, 1991.

⁹ Billie Holiday was “one of the most important and influential singers in the evolving traditions of blues and jazz. At the age of fifteen she made her singing debut at Pod and Jerry’s, a Harlem speakeasy. For the next fifteen years, she sang to loyal audiences in the jazz clubs of Manhattan. In later years, she performed in New York City at the Apollo Theater, the Metropolitan Opera House, Town Hall, and Carnegie Hall; she appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival and toured extensively in Europe and Scandinavia. Holiday made her film debut in *Symphony in Black* (1935) with Duke Ellington’s orchestra and later appeared with Louis Armstrong in *New Orleans* (1947).” (Rudolph Byrd, *Genreations in Black and White: Photographs by Carl Van Vetchen from the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993)

¹⁰ In African religion, LeRoi Jones cites an old African dictum that states, “the spirit will not descend without song” (Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People*. New York: William Morrow, 1963. 81). As well, in *Christio-Conjure*, “through the text of a song, a

performer communicates personal knowledge of the meaning of Black survival in America, and the contribution that religion has made to that survival.” (Mellonee Burnim. “Biblical Inspiration, Cultural Affirmation: The African American Gift of Song” Ed. Vincent L. Wimbish. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. New York: Continuum, 2000. 614)

¹¹ As noted in the introduction, according to Hurston, a “mounting” entails possession by a divinity as experienced by Sassafrass, as opposed to possession by the spirit of a deceased person, as experienced by Lena in *Baby of the Family*.

¹² Blue Sunday, Rachel in *Baby of the Family*, and Sapphira in *Mama Day* all function as “disappearing Africans,” a recurring “escape from slavery” motif in African American folklore. In addition, since all three characters are represented as deceased, they also function as spirits of subversive slave women.

¹³ Strandness further explains: “since the loa is not viewed as the spirit of an individual, but as an ancestral spirit which can pass from generation to generation, it is also conceivable that Aunt Haydee’s loa would transfer to Indigo, that Indigo would then manifest the spirit of the wise woman who had been her mentor.” (Jean Strandness. “Reclaiming Women’s Language, Imagery, and Experience: Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*.” *Journal of American Culture* 10 (1987): 11-17. 15)

Chapter Six

¹ Regarding the formation of Christio-Conjure in Gullah culture, Charles Joyner contends that “the missionary efforts were an important source of Afro-Christianity among slaves on the sea island of All Saints Parish. But the slaves did not simply adopt the Christian God and his faith. In their efforts to establish a spiritual life for themselves, they interpreted the elements of Christianity in terms of deep-rooted African cognitive orientations. In stressing the significance of the African contribution to slave Christianity, it would be a mistake to leave the impression that Africa was culturally homogenous or that it bequeathed to its exiles in the New World a legacy of static survivals. On the contrary, African religious expression was so diverse that borrowings were common among various ethnic groups. Since slaves could no longer find anything approximating the African context of their sacred cosmos, they worshipped their new Christian God with the kind of expressive behavior their cultural heritage taught them was appropriate for an important deity.” (*Down by the Riverside*, Joyner 159-60)

² Jackson reports that “Sea island blacks have frequently owned their land since the years before reconstruction. The people were very isolated from the mainstream culture until recently, and they survived by developing a posture of self-sufficiency and independence. The presence of black majority, the ownership of fertile lands since their first awareness, and the isolation and independence have created a unique psyche for blacks in the sea island area. Many of them have a fierce kind of pride and a lack of fear which is seldom seen in other places.” (Jackson 160)

³ Loudell Snow argues that the “seventh son” legacy is a universal theme: “there is a widespread belief that the seventh son sibling of the same sex, Seventh Sister or Seventh Son (especially of a Seventh Son of a Seventh Son), has unusual abilities. This idea seems to have appeared in Europe in the sixteenth century and is now found worldwide. The most powerful West African gods were seven in number as well, and appear in the New World as the Seven African Powers, or Spirits” (Loudell F. Snow “Con Men and Conjure Men: A Ghetto Image.” *Literature and Medicine* (Fall 1983): 52). Examining “seventh son” legacy in *Mama Day*, Valerie Lee contends that “for Mama Day to be the daughter of a seventh son of a seventh son is to acknowledge the specialty of her family genealogy. Descended from the African, Sapphira, and fourteen men with biblical names covering the Old and New Testaments, Mama Day’s stock is solid.” (Lee 131-33)

⁴ The grand narrative of suffering—coupled with the presentation of Christio-Conjure as a catalyst for emotional, psychological, and spiritual healing—is a more striking theme in *Voodoo Dreams* and is treated extensively in chapter five.

⁵ [Christio]-Conjurers “were religious leaders in black communities, sacred practitioners who personified discrete African religious practices in the New World, passed on to succeeding generations with new meaning and significance. Mysterious, marginal individuals, they possessed charismatic qualities that enabled them to divine the

future, heal by ritual means, and offer supernatural assurance and protection to those who requested it.” (Chireau 51)

⁶ Valerie Lee critiques larger-than-life literary midwives like Shappira while discussing the relationship between historical and literary black lay midwives; she notes, “Before I began my own ethnographic work, I thought that African American women writers were romanticizing the historical [black lay midwives] and folk healers. After all, in [black women’s literature] the [black lay midwives] and women healers have tremendous powers.[. . .] The literary women seem limited only by their authors’ creative imaginations. Yet after listening to the historical [black lay midwives] tell their stories, I learned they have been complicit in the shaping of themselves as larger than life, albeit unwittingly so. That is, however fabulous we read the writers’ fables, there are equally extraordinary folk beliefs in the histories of the grannies. The granny’s beliefs and her community’s beliefs helped shape her grandeur.” (Lee 101)

⁷ Clearly Naylor’s treatment of Sapphira can be classified as a neo-slave narrative. Drawing a connection between the *historical narratives* and the *literary narratives* of black lay midwives, Lee views the relationship through the lens of the *neo-slave narrative* by observing that “the historical black lay midwives constructed and re-constructed their identities in ways that made it easy for their communities and the literary writers to see them as larger than life.” She says “the black lay midwives’ stories are formulaic enough to be neo-slave narratives.” (Lee 19)

⁸ The presentation of Sapphira in the novel as ruthless coincides with the biblical character Sapphira who, in the Book of Acts, is punished for her hypocrisy: “*This woman and her husband withhold money for themselves that has been dedicated to the common good. When Peter confronts her with her falsehood, she lies to him*” and “*falls down dead.*” (Edith Deen. *All the Women of the Bible*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955, 213, original emphasis). An additional unsavory characterization linked to Naylor’s Sapphira is the stereotype of the *Sapphire*, a term that not only denotes black color, but also signals “the denigrating racial prototype of the emasculating black woman.” (Geneva Smitherman. *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1977, 68). In *Mama Day*, however, these disparaging characterizations are ultimately redeemed as Sapphira, island liberator, is transformed into a deified goddess.

⁹ Further exposing the sexist and patriarchal facets of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its culpability in the historical subjugation of women, Bolen asserts that “the promised land of the Old Testament already belonged to goddess worshipping people. The biblical prophets railed against the abominations of Asherah, Anath, and Ashtoreth, these were goddesses and/or shrines to them.” Bolen also discusses contemptuous depictions of the Judeo-Christian God who was considered “ignorant of his own mother, in others. Yahweh is castigated for his arrogance and jealousy.” (Jean Shinoda Bolen. *Goddesses in Older Women: Archetypes in Women Over Fifty*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001, 39 & 43)

¹⁰ Honoring lay midwives, Lee outlines a distinction between biblical prophet Moses—as an archetypal savior in African American folk culture—and the midwives

who served both the Israeli and Egyptian women in the Bible. She says, “in African American culture preachers and politicians envisioned themselves as a type of Black Moses leading their people from bondage to freedom, the black lay midwives rested securely in the knowledge that Moses would not have lived had it not been for subversive Hebrew midwives and a mother who refused to follow the laws of the land when those laws conflicted with their spiritual beliefs. Because the Israelites were rapidly multiplying, Pharaoh instructed senior midwives Shiphrah and Puah: ‘When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter then she shall live.’ (Exodus 1:16). The Egyptians needed the daughters as house servants, whereas the sons were potential soldiers, fighting from within enemy territory. As threatening as a command from Pharaoh was, Shiphrah and Puah showed remarkable courage by defying the order. Fearing God more than they feared Pharaoh, the midwives did not kill the newborns, claiming that pregnant Hebrew women, unlike Egyptian women, delivered quickly, so quickly that the midwives, walking very slowly undoubtedly, could not get there on time. God blessed the midwives, and stories of their courage helped many women, including the mother of Moses, to resist when Pharaoh issued a second command—that all boy babies be thrown in the river ([Exodus 11:17-22] qtd. in Lee 80-81). Thus, “the contribution of the midwives overshadows that of Moses, since without their fortitude he would have been killed as an infant.” (Lee 81)

¹¹ Regarding the historical role of black lay midwives in black women’s literature, Lee says, “this history takes a distinctive twist when black women began to dominate rural southern midwifery. This was a time when the black lay midwife’s phrase ‘catching babies’ became ‘studying obstetrics,’ erupting cultural conflicts, the historical and cultural contexts of the black lay midwives’ lives inform African American women’s literature. Whereas feminist social scientists and medical persons have reclaimed nurse midwifery, it has been left to African American women novelists to preserve the language, lore, and learning of the black lay midwives.” (Lee 24)

¹² Lee says *Mama Day* is “everybody’s mama” in the novel, and she assesses *Mama Day* within the context of historical black lay midwives, asserting that “in their respective communities” these “women were known for their social and political activism. Perhaps the ordinary lives of [black lay midwives] become extraordinary in fictional narratives because they have always been such in their communities. For her Willow Springs community, *Mama Day*’s Miranda is both grandmother and *grand* mother.” (Lee 19-20)

¹³ Further defining the relationship between conjure & medicine, Eugene Genovese suggests that “the deeper meaning of the widespread use of folk medicine by the slaves lay in its function as an agency for the transmission of black religious sensibility into a defense against the psychological assaults of slavery and racial oppression.” (Eugene Genovese. *Roll Jordan Roll*. New York: Vintage, 1976. 113)

Chapter Seven

¹ According to Savina Teubal, “the biblical matriarch Hagar, like her biblical counterpart Sarah, played a significant role in the genesis of Hebrew culture. Yet she has been doomed to remain as simply an adjunct to the patriarch Abraham. According to the biblical text Hagar, was Sarah’s handmaid, but most references describe her as Abraham’s concubine. In Muslim tradition, Hagar is the mother of the Arabs, yet the matriarch Hagar is never mentioned by name in the Qur’an, the Holy Book of Islam. She is represented simply as the wife of the patriarch Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, from whom the Arab peoples trace their descent. In her role as concubine, which is tantamount to slave, Hagar’s *raison d’être* is the same as Sarah’s: to give sexual service and provide offspring to Abraham. Both women were presumably capable of the former, but Sarah was incapable of the latter. In effect then, and for a period of time, both women enjoy comparable status—Sarah as the honored first wife, Hagar as the future provider of a son and heir. The story of the ensuing relationship between the two women is meant to reflect the powerlessness of a childless woman, the ascent in rank of a pregnant one, and both women’s need for male approval of their status. The stories also portray the two women as dependent on the male (god or man) to resolve their conflicts. In *Hagar the Egyptian*, Teubal compares the life of Hagar as presented in the Genesis narratives with the life of Sarah. She demonstrates that the matriarch Hagar was no more a slave or concubine than Sarah was a conventional wife. Both the women have the elevated status of being regarded as the ancestress of a people: Hagar as the mother of Islam, Sarah as mother of the Hebrews.” (Savina Teubal. *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990. xiv-xv)

² By introducing the character of the Unborn Child, Dash complicates the notion of ancestor reverence by presenting the spirit of a family member who is yet born. Like the spirits of the ancestors, the spirit of the Unborn Child also intercedes on behalf of the living from the spiritual realm, and in this sense, functions in the same capacity as deceased ancestors. In the film script Nana testifies, “[t]he ancestors and the womb [. . .] they’re one, they’re the same.” The spirit of the Unborn Child confirms her great-grandmother’s testimony by recalling Nana’s appeal to the spirit world; she concludes, “Nana prayed for help. I got there just in time.” (Julie Dash. *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*. New York: The New Press, 1992. 94 and 99)

³ Dash identifies the significance of “the myth of the Ibo Landing, which helped sustain the slaves, the people who were living in that region [. . .] Ibo captives, African captives of the Ibo tribe, when brought to the New World, refused to live in slavery. There are accounts of them having walked into the water, flown all the way back to Africa. And then there is the story—the truth or the myth—of them walking into the water and drowning themselves in front of the captors. I was able, in my research, to read some of the accounts from the sailors who were on the ship when supposedly it happened, and a lot of the shipmates, the sailor or other crew members, had nervous breakdowns watching this. Watching the Ibo men and women and children in shackles,

walking into the water and holding themselves under the water until they in fact drowned. And then interestingly enough, in my research, I found that almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, 'This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened. This is where this thing really happened.' And so, why is it that on every little island—and there are so many places—people say, 'This is actually Ibo Landing?' It's because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth. So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future." (Dash 29-30)

⁴ bell hooks contends that history for Viola begins not with what has happened in the slave past or what is happening on the islands, but at that moment of crossover. And in that sense, she represents a kind of premodern figure for me, because she's the one that says, essentially: "When we cross over to the mainland we are going to have culture." That's capital-C culture, if she had her way, she would strip the past of all memory and would replace it only with markers of what she takes to be the new civilization. In this way Christianity became the hidden force of colonialism. The film really touched upon the question of domestic colonization and how black people, like Haagar and like Viola internalized a sense of what culture is." (Dash 37-38)

⁵ For black female writers who envision their work as didactic, the merger of activism and scholarship operates in contrast to structuralism's attempt to derive meaning from form as well as post-structuralism's assertion that the author is dead. Patricia Hill Collins discusses the merger of activism and scholarship in black women's writing, noting that contemporary black women intellectuals continue to draw on the tradition of using everyday actions and experiences in their theoretical work. She discusses bell hooks' experience working as an operator at the telephone company while writing *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). The women she worked with wanted her to "write a book that would make [their] lives better, one that would make other people understand the hardships of being black and female" (1989, 152). To hooks, "it was different [. . .] writing in a context where [her] ideas were not seen as separate from real people and real lives." (qtd. in Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 152)

⁶ By being accountable to others, African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves. Sonia Sanchez points to this version of self by stating, "we must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there's a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people. Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides black women deeper, more meaningful self-definition." (Collins 105-06)

⁷ The legacy of struggle is a core theme in black women's writing. Katie Cannon observes that "throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the black woman's reality as a

situation of struggle—struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed.” In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women” (Collins 22). The roles of artist, scholar, and critic do not offer protection against such forms of oppression. In fact, on a personal and professional level, black female artists and scholars share these same concerns.

⁸ According to Collins, “[t]hrough the process of rearticulation, black women intellectuals offer African-American women a different view of themselves and their world from that forwarded by the dominant group. By taking the core themes of a black women’s standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black women intellectuals can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women’s everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, black feminist thought affirms and rearticulates consciousness that already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance.” (Collins 31-32)

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